Neither Here Nor There

Mehraz Rahman

Plan II Honors Program
The University of Texas at Austin
May 15, 2019

Matt Valentine, M.F.A.
Plan II Honors Program
Supervising Professor

Syed A. Hyder, Ph.D.
Department of Asian Studies
Second Reader

Abstract

Author: Mehraz Rahman

Title: *Neither Here Nor There*

Supervising Professor: Matt Valentine, M.F.A.

Neither Here Nor There is a collection of three short stories that depict Bangladeshi women living in the United States. This work examines the South Asian diaspora through the lenses of Bangladeshi women, both immigrants and first-generation individuals, through several major themes. For example, some of the stories examine how various social issues—such as the lack of mental health awareness, the stigma surrounding interpersonal violence, women's rights issues, and toxic masculinity—impact Bangladeshis who are living in the West. Some of the stories demonstrate intergenerational differences between members of Bangladeshi families and illustrate how first-generation children of immigrants can often be made to feel as though they belong in neither the culture of the parents nor that in which they grew up. This work exhibits the perceptions of Bangladeshi people from both other South Asians and Westerners. The disparities between the lifestyles of Bangladeshi American people and native Bangladeshi people is also explored.

Acknowledgements

To my Ammu and my Abbu: thank you, endlessly. I have everything that I have because of you. I know everything I know because of you. But, more importantly, I am everything I am because of you. And I now know that I don't have to be torn between two cultures, but that I can be a bridge. For that, I am eternally grateful.

To my thesis advisor, Matt Valentine: I could not have finished this process without your guidance and attentive eye. Thank you for helping me finish writing this thesis and take on this creative project, starting from Writing Narratives. You had your hands full this year with all of us, but we are so grateful to you.

To my second reader, Dr. Syed A. Hyder: Thank you for the constant encouragement. Your insights, thematically and emotionally, greatly enriched my journey through this project.

And to everyone else—my friends, my chosen family—who put up with me throughout this whole process: I am genuinely sorry for being such a pain. Thank you for listening to my late-night rants. Thank you for editing my stories, even when they put you to sleep or made you cringe. Thank you for still choosing to be my friend, even with all the quality time that I had to forego this year due to this thesis and all the other things that I over-committed myself to. Just, thank you. I couldn't have done it without you.

Contents

Artist's Treatise

BACKGROUND

Introduction

My thesis, entitled *Neither Here Nor There,* is a collection of short stories that revolves around the central theme of Bangladeshi women living in America. I chose to write on this subject as a reflection of the ways that my Bangladeshi-American heritage has profoundly impacted and shaped my life. My parents are both immigrants from the country of Bangladesh, and everything I am today is as a result of the decision they made to drop everything they knew in their home country and immigrate to America in order to make sure that any future children they had could have the best life possible. Everything I did growing up was influenced by the two cultures that I felt constantly torn between—the Bangladeshi one that my parents brought from halfway across the world and the American one that I was born into here.

Starting from my skin color, my thick curly black hair, and my difficult-to-pronounce name—everything set me apart from my peers. Bengali was my first language; I did not even learn English until I was obligated to by the start of elementary school. At my parents' insistence, I learned how to read and write in Bengali. Most of my childhood memories are of me being deeply immersed in the Bangladeshi community here in Austin where I grew up. I sang and I danced at cultural events, donning Bangladeshi clothing and surrounded by my Bangladeshi family friends. Religiously, every summer, I attended a Bengali school run by family friends in order to ensure that their children would retain the rich culture and history that would otherwise die with them. In a more literal sense of the word, I religiously went to Islamic school in order learn to read in Arabic and commit to memory the stories of the various Islamic prophets. I struggled with balancing the love I have for my Bangladeshi and Muslim heritage with my desire to fit in with my American peers at school.

As I've grown older, the less torn between the two cultures I've felt; instead, I strive to become a bridge between the two. I have learned to embrace the vibrancy of the culture that my

parents gave me, even though that embrace magnifies differences between myself and my peers. I always make efforts to share my culture with my peers, as we figure out how to learn and grow from each other and the "melting pot" that America claims to be. While I am still figuring out how to become that human embodiment of a bridge between two cultures, I am learning more each and every day. I am learning that my parents' accents are nothing to be ashamed of. I am learning that Eurocentric beauty standards that have been taught to me by society and the media shouldn't guide my perception of my appearance. I am learning how to navigate the unspoken hierarchy of South Asians that places Bangladeshis toward the bottom of the totem pole. I am learning how not to feel like a burden because of how difficult it is for some of my peers to pronounce my name. I am learning that being proud of my Bangladeshi and Muslim heritage doesn't mean I have to compromise being a patriotic American. In writing this thesis, I have found yet another learning tool in my lifelong process of figuring out how to be this bridge; in this treatise, I will attempt to explain how.

Inspiration

While I always knew, due to my heritage and background, that I wanted to write a thesis related to Bangladesh in some way, I never thought that I would pursue a creative project like *Neither Here Nor There*. I spent the majority of my third year in college contemplating research projects that I could take on that were related to the lack of mental health awareness in Bangladesh and its connection to poverty there. Even though I've always been an avid reader, particularly of realistic fiction that explored the narratives of immigrants—such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*—it wasn't until I encountered Tarfia Faizullah's *Seam* that I ever considered taking on a creative project for my thesis.

When I first encountered Tarfia Faizullah's poems, it was a happy accident. They were assigned to me in a creative writing course. It turned out that we had a lot in common. Tarfia, a

first-generation Bangladeshi-American, grew up in Texas and attended the University of Texas at Austin, where she majored in Plan II Honors, just like me. I met her last year, when she came to my creative writing course, and I felt a kinship with her that I feel like is encompassed in the words she used to sign my book: she is my "deshi sister."

Her poetry had a profound impact on me, as a reader, not just because her poetry was beautiful and thoughtfully-written, but also because it made me realize both that I had a gap in my historical knowledge of Bangladesh and that there aren't very many pieces of Bangladeshi English Literature (BEL) out there. In other words, there isn't very much literature written about Bangladeshis or written by Bangladeshi authors, especially when compared to Indian English Literature or Pakistani English Literature. There are so many stories and pieces of history that are going to become lost when my generation grows up without having learned any of it.

Seam is a collection of poetry written about the Birangona, a group of women existing in Bangladesh under a dark cloud of taboo. As such, I had never learned about them, these 200,000 to 400,000 women, who were raped and sexually abused by the Pakistani army during the Liberation War of 1971. Even though my parents had educated me extensively in the Bengali language and the history of Bangladesh, this was still a gaping hole in my historical knowledge. Faizullah went to Bangladesh on a Fulbright scholarship to interview these women and write about their experiences in her poems, in a way that is both thoughtful and serious as well as informative, but not insensitive. This book won the Crab Orchard Series first poetry book award. It is important for her work to be known in Bangladesh as there are not many Bangladeshi literary figures in the world (yet) who are as renowned as Faizullah. At the same time, her work as well as other works of BEL can bring knowledge about Bangladeshi culture to the western world. Reading *Seam* and learning more about how little Bangladeshi English Literature is available for mass consumption is ultimately what made me decide to take on this collection of short stories. I have engaged with these works in more ways than one, having translated an

assortment of poems from *Seam* from English to Bengali. Below, I have included a few of my translations.

Preface to "Dhaka Aubade" / মুখবন্ধ "ঢাকার ভোরের কাকলি"

I place one foot then the other on each narrow, rusty step to where the concrete floor is rough and raised as a calloused hand. The speakers from the green-domed mosque click on, heralding the start of *adhan*, call to prayer. Other *adhans* start up, overlap like a choral round, surround me with rich, thrumming Arabic. The sun sets past rooftops, lush green trees, women hurrying past lithe, dark men holding hands. Dusk settles. Each window carved into Dhaka's many high-rises begins to flicker with light.

এক পায়ের পর আরেক পা দেই সরু বিবর্ণ সিঁড়ির উপরে যেখানে শানবাঁধানো মেঝে অমসৃণ ও অসমান কড়া-পড়া হাতের মতন। সবুজ গম্বুজবিশিষ্ট মসজিদের স্পিকারগুলো চালু হয়ে, তার সাথে আজান, সবাইকে নামাজে ডাকে। অন্য মসজিদগুলোতেও আজান শুরু হয়, প্রতিধ্বনিত হয় একসাথে, আমার চারপাশ ঘিরে আসে ঘন, অনুরণনের আরবি। প্রত্যেকটা ছাদের, প্রত্যেকটা সতেজ সবুজ গাছের পিছনে সূর্য ডোবে। সেইসঙ্গে হাতে হাত ধরা শ্যামল লোকদের পাশ দিয়ে একহারা গড়নের মহিলারা দ্রুত হেঁটে পার হয়ে যায়। সন্ধ্যা নামে। ঢাকার অনেক বহুতলবিশিষ্ট দালানের প্রতিটি জানালা জ্বলতে শুরু করে মৃদু আলোয়।

"Dhaka Aubade" / "ঢাকার ভোরের কাকলি"

Outside, too fragile
not to consider: rebar
puncturing sky, empty
sweet boxes stacked
into columns, another
call to prayer loud then
waning. Even this
mosquito netting boxing
my bed is in danger.
I wake up from some dream
that leaves me doubled
over in this light cutting
away half my body—
how can people hurt
each other, go on
living? Today, I don't
want anything
to touch me. I dreamt,
Sister, that you were
resurrected, no longer
bone erasing bone.
This water lustrous
with so many people's
shit continues to tunnel,
relentless. How do I love
as much as I say I do?

বাইরে, এত ভঙ্গুর যে
        বিবেচনা না করলেই নয়: ইস্পাতের রড
আকাশ ফুটো করে, খালি
        মিষ্টির বাকসো থরে-থরে
থাম করে সাজানো, আর-একটা
        সজোর আজান তখন
ক্ষীয়মাণ। এমন কি
        আমার বিছানা ঘিরে থাকা
মশারিটিও বিপদে আছে।
        আমি কোনো স্বপ্ন থেকে জেগে উঠি
যা আমাকে উবু করে রেখে যায়
        আমার শরীর কেটে অর্ধেক করে
এই আলোর মধ্যে —
        কিভাবে মানুষ কষ্ট দেয়
একে অপরকে, যাপন করে চলে
        জীবন? আজ, আমি
চাই না কোনো কিছুই আমাকে
        ছুঁক। আমি স্বপ্ন দেখেছি যে,
বোন, তুমি পুনর্জীবন
        নিয়েছ, আর নেই
হাড় ধসানো হাড়।
        এই জল উজ্বল
শত মানুষের
        গুয়ে গড়িয়ে চলতে থাকে,
অবিরাম। কিভাবে আমি অতটা ভালোবাসি
        যতটা আমি বলি আমি বাসি?

“Interview with a Birangona” / "বীরাঙ্গনার সঙ্গে সাক্ষাত্কার"

> *In 1972, the Bangladeshi state adopted a policy to accord a new visibility to the two hundred thousand women raped during the War of Independence by lionizing them as birangonas (war heroines), though they were frequently ostracized by their families and social circles.*

I. What were you doing when they came for you?

Gleaming water sweeps over
Mother’s feet. Bayonets. Teeth.

My green and yellow Eid sari
flaps damply between two palm

trees. Grandfather calls to me:

mishti maya. Girl of sweetness.

Aashi, I call back. I finish braiding
my hair, tie it tight. I twine a red string

around my thigh. That evening,
a blade sliced through string, through

skin, red on red on red. *Kutta*, the man
in khaki says. It is only later I realize

it is me he is calling *dog*. *Dog*. *Dog*.

১৯৭২ সালে, বাংলাদেশ রাষ্ট্র একটি নতুন নীতি গ্রহণ করে সেই দুই লক্ষ মহিলাদের বীরাঙ্গনা হিসাবে স্বীকৃতিদানের মধ্য দিয়ে দৃশ্যমান করতে, যারা মুক্তিযুদ্ধের সময় ধর্ষিত হয়েছেন, যদিও উনাদের পরিবার এবং সামাজিক বলয় উনাদেরকে প্রায়শই একঘরে করে দেয়।

১। কী করছিলেন যখন তারা আপনার জন্য এসেছিলেন?

জ্বলজ্বলে জল বুলিয়ে যায়
মায়ের পায়ের উপর দিয়ে। বেয়োনেট। দাঁত।

আমার সবুজ আর হলুদ ঈদের শাড়ী
আর্দ্রভাবে ছটফট করে দুই তাল গাছের

মাঝখানে। নানা ভাই আমাকে ডাকেন:
মিষ্টি মাইয়া। মধুর মতন মেয়ে।

আসি, আমি উনাকে বলি। আমি বেনী করা শেষ করি,
আমার চুল আঁট করে বাঁধি। আমি একটা লাল সুতা

আমার উরুতে বেঁধে রাখি। সেই একই রাতে,
একটি ছুরি সুতা কেটে যায়, চামড়া

কেটে যায়, লালের উপর লালের উপর লাল। *কুত্তা,* বলে
খাকি প্যান্ট পরা লোকটা। পরে আমি বুঝতে পারি

সে আমাকেই *কুত্তা* বলে ডাকছে। *কুত্তা। কুত্তা।*

PROCESS

Goals

Before I began writing, I had to ask myself the question: who did I want my audience to be? In considering that question, I struggled to decide what I wanted my readers to experience and how I want them to reacted to my stories. Ultimately, I decided that my work would be both informative to people who have not experienced any of the situations in the stories and relatable to Bangladeshis—particularly Bangladeshi women—who usually don't feel represented in the literature that has been written. I wanted non-Bangladeshi people to be able to learn something about Bangladeshi culture and experiences. I also wanted to be able to provide validation, recognition, and solidarity to those who have had those unique experiences. In the writing process, these goals proved to be difficult to reach simultaneously.

Another goal that I talked about when discussing *Seam* was that my work—as a contribution to Bangladeshi English Literature, generally—could serve as a tool to diminish the gap in historical knowledge that a lot of first-generation children of Bangladeshi immigrants have. Ultimately, I didn't end up reaching this. In that process of realizing that I wasn't going to be able to reach all the goals that I had laid out for myself at the beginning, I developed a fear that I would not be able to convey all the things that I wanted to while writing about this topic that is so important to me. In this section, I will detail all the techniques and processes I used to diminish this fear.

Techniques

As a collection of realistic fiction short stories, my thesis is a work of creative writing. To develop the techniques needed to write these short stories, I spent time creating natural-sounding dialogue for people with many different personalities that are different than mine. Part of my process included listening to how other people talk—both my peers as well as those in different generations. I also practiced descriptive exercises and observational exercises to sharpen my ability to describe domestic scenes and situations that I have not experienced before. In order to write about characters who have experiences that I haven't, I had many

conversations—on background, not a formal interview or research—with acquaintances who shared some personal anecdotes and perspectives that provided me with a lot of insight before I started writing. The purpose of these interviews was to give me a more vivid sense of the textures of different social interactions and the complexities of family histories and experiences.

Before I began writing each individual story, I started the process by naming each character and fleshing out their personalities. Regardless of whether or not all of this background information would make it into the story, it was valuable for me to get to know each character before writing. I found that all of this background work enriched my writing throughout the character development process. It also really helped, before I began writing each story, to flesh out the timeline of each story. Unfortunately, I didn't realize how helpful this would be until later in my writing process when I found that one of my greatest weaknesses was starting stories and not being able to come up with endings for them. This technique especially helped in those situations.

Fighting Perfectionism

As I mentioned before, my goals were fairly ambitious. To be both be educational to non-Bangladeshi women and relatable to Bangladeshi women simultaneously proved to be a difficult feat. In addition to this fact, being a Bangladeshi woman is something that I have spent my entire life asking questions and coming up with answers about. There were many things that I wanted to convey in my stories. I had a very specific idea of the ideas that I wanted people to be able to discern after reading my work. For example, I wanted the negative effects of sexual violence on South Asian women and the stigma surrounding it to be apparent. As such, I had to focus on not saying too much and letting the audience come to these realizations themselves. I had to be able to trust that my audience was going to be able to discern the messages that I was trying to convey in the words that I was putting out into the world.

Another thing I struggled with, quite simply put, was finishing the stories. Sticking through and finishing a story was a lot harder than I originally thought it was going to be. Before I had finished a single story, I had dozens of abandoned stories littering the thesis folder in my Google Drive. As my thesis deadline loomed closer, I became more and more panicked about finishing my work. I eventually realized that I could fix a lot of things in the editing process, but there would be nothing to fix if I didn't complete even the first drafts. My attitude shifted once this realization was made. I started to focus on getting my thoughts and the content onto the page and then focusing on crafting the perfect sentences using the perfect words after the fact.

I also worried that, to some readers, it might seem as if I am speaking on behalf of a whole people—all Bangladeshi women living in the United States. As I tried to make all of my characters generalized so that they would be "relatable" and consistent portraits of how Bangladeshi-Americans might behave, I realized that I was uncomfortable with some implications of that generalization. I struggled with putting all the things that my friends and I who share the same identities have experienced on the page. Further, it was actually taking away from the authenticity of my characters. While I had to give up being able to convey some of the things that are experienced by all Bangladeshi-Americans, I needed to be authentic to each character and who they were so that they weren't just a stand-in formula for any Bangladeshi person living in America. Every story is different, and I was here to share only three of them.

Abandoned Stories

As I mentioned before, I now have dozens of unfinished stories that are cluttering up the thesis folder in my Google Drive. However, I wanted to take a moment to talk about one specific story called "Broken Bodies" that was included in the collection until the very last moment. And, in abandoning this story, I failed in my goal of shaping my stories to be a tool to bridge the gap in people's historical understanding of Bangladesh.

This story, when I first started writing, was the only one that I knew for sure I wanted to include in my collection, mainly because—after reading *Seam*—I really wanted to have a story that illustrated the Birangona. I felt like it was really important for me to learn about it and, as such, it is really important for other people to learn about it as well. I remember being shocked when I first learned about them, at both the fact that I had never heard of these heroic women before and that my parents hadn't taught me about them. As the situation stands right now, the stigma surrounding sexual violence in South Asian cultures makes it something that's not really talked about.

As I am reflecting back on why this story was so difficult for me to write, I struggle even now to discuss it. I think part of it was that I couldn't find the words to give justice to the stories of these women who have lost so much in a war that was waged not only on their country and their mother tongue, but also on their bodies. My own history with interpersonal violence complicated what I wanted to accomplish with this story. I wanted to somehow communicate all the things that I, as a survivor, felt when I first learned about them. And I wanted my story to somehow illustrate the connection that I immediately felt with these women because of what I had also been through. At the end of the day, I couldn't accomplish all of these things at once. Perhaps this will be one of the stories that I come back to one day.

Other Works

While I don't believe that my work directly borrows from work by other artists, some artists whose works I've read will definitely inspire some of my writings. For example, the works of Khaled Hosseini, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Tarifa Faizullah have definitely impacted my work. Before I started writing, my thesis advisor and I discussed some of the works I should read. And, while the bits and pieces I was able to read from the books and stories he suggested were helpful, I realized that some of the works I had been consuming since a young age had already created a picture for what I was aspiring to build with my own stories.

I first read Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* in middle school. The way in which I was able to learn about the realities of living in Afghanistan at the time, and the way I became invested in the characters inspired me. The way that Hosseini depicted the heartbreaking tale of two women stuck with me my entire life. In Jhumpa Lahiri's books, *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, she successfully depicts the stories of a whole host of Bengali characters. In addition, her collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, showed me how one could use the stories of many in order to teach people about the culture without having to be representative of every Bangladeshi. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, she manages to tell the harrowing story of a Nigerian immigrant, while also making it a riveting love story. The fact that the main character of the novel is a race blogger enabled her to share the story in such a way that it was digestible to non-black people but also validating and relatable to women and people of color. I wanted to be able to accomplish something similar in my own work. And, of course, as I've mentioned before, *Seam*, even though it is a collection of poetry, was the piece of literature that influenced my short stories most in that it pushed me to write them in the first place. There is a whole range of other works that have impacted my writing for many years before I even thought about writing something on my own, and I didn't even realize it.

THEMES

Neither Here Nor There

The title of *Neither Here Nor There* came about as a way to depict the inner struggle that many children of immigrants face: not fully belonging in either of our communities. We are too foreign for our western side and too white for our parents' side. In my stories, I have examined the South Asian diaspora through the lenses of various Bangladeshi women of all different age groups, all of whom live in America. My work has encompassed several major themes. Among them:

- How various social impact issues—such as the lack of mental health awareness, the stigma surrounding interpersonal violence, women's rights issues, and toxic masculinity—affect Bangladeshis who are living in America
- Double standards in the treatment of women in South Asian communities
- Intergenerational differences between members of Bangladeshi families
- Differences in lifestyle between Bangladeshi-Americans and native Bangladeshis

"My Name is Pallavi"

While there were general themes that spanned my entire thesis, particular additional themes were emphasized in individual stories as well. "My Name is Pallavi" is a story about a high school-aged girl who struggles in her primarily white community since everything about her screams foreign. Her name is hard to pronounce, and her skin is brown. At the same time, she feels more connected in many ways to her Bangladeshi side than to her American side. This dynamic is complicated, because her seemingly normal nuclear family is more dysfunctional than meets the eye.

In the story, Pallavi goes to a *dawat*, which is the Bengali word for "party" or "social gathering," in which she finds herself in a room with some of the older kids from her Bangladeshi community. Giddy with the feeling of being amongst the "cool kids," she gets into an uncomfortable situation with some of her peers. At that point, the story explores how the awkward adolescent relationships between girls and boys can lead to situations in which girls are at a disadvantage. Some of the themes incorporated into this story include:

- Dysfunctional family dynamics and growing up in a household with parental conflict
- *Dawats* and Bangladeshi community gatherings as a setting
- Dynamics of young adult relationships and friendships, particularly the relationship between males and females

- The perception of Bangladeshi people in comparison to the perception of other South Asian people, such as Indian and Pakistani people
- Stigma surrounding sexual violence in South Asian communities and how that stigma impacts young women

"Pink City"

"Pink City," which is the name of a shopping mall in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, is a coming-of-age story. In this story, the main character Ishika, who is originally from Chandler, Arizona, is visiting Bangladesh with her immediate family. Coincidentally, her family friend group from back home is also in Bangladesh for various reasons. They decide to meet up in Bangladesh to have a girls' day, which—for this group ranging from middle school to high school-aged—is very novel and exciting. Their outing, which is meant to be a fun and carefree adventure, becomes punctuated by various encounters with native Bangladeshi people and by incidents that highlight how being a woman can be kind of tough. Throughout the story, Ishika learns firsthand how being a woman is sometimes quite inopportune.

"Pink City" explores the ideas of growing up as a girl in a Bangladeshi community in a more lighthearted story than the others in the collection. Some of the themes incorporated into this story are as outlined below:

- Juxtaposition between lifestyles of Bangladeshis in America and in Bangladesh
- First-generation Bangladeshis and their feelings of not belonging in either of their communities
- Complicated nature of young female friendships
- Navigating puberty and the awkwardness that comes along with it

"Bhapa Pitha"

"Bhapa Pitha," which is also the name of a dessert dish, is a story about a mother whose son has been sent to prison for a horrible crime. In this story, Tazrin, who is a Bangladeshi immigrant married to a Freedom Fighter from the 1971 Liberation War, visits her son at the correctional facility and meets an interesting security guard named A. Gomes. Throughout the story, she struggles with her feelings about her son and what he has allegedly done. With a husband who is debilitated from war and a tight-knit New Hampshire Bangladeshi community that has turned its back on her, she must face the situation alone.

The story illustrates these themes:

- Motherhood as an immigrant and raising a child in an immigrant community
- Mother-son relationships and the associated intergenerational conflict
- Negative perceptions of Muslims in America, particularly due to the events of 9/11
- Bangladeshi food and cultural identity

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Even though I didn't end up creating a collection of short stories that is ready for publication, writing this thesis gave me the opportunity to think deeply about questions that have been plaguing me for a while. Did I have an obligation, as a Bangladeshi-American woman, to bridge the gap in historical knowledge that had been omitted from oral tradition? Did I also have an obligation to teach my peers about Bangladesh? About what it means to be a Bangladeshi-American woman? Of my experiences growing up in America with brown skin and a Muslim last name? I'm still not fully certain, but I'm a lot closer to figuring it all out.

This project gave me, also, the opportunity to fail—completely and constantly. Every story that I started and abandoned and every goal that I didn't reach was an example of me failing—and it happened quite a lot. In my life, I feel as though I have learned a lot more from all the instances in which I have failed than in in my instances of success. While this may sound

strange, I feel like it is one of the most important experiences to have come out of this whole process.

Ultimately, this was an exercise in thinking just as much as it was in writing. I never thought how difficult it would be for me to write about a topic that I care so much about when I have to labor over each and every word that goes in each and every sentence. While I do not feel entirely satisfied with this work, it has still given me confidence that, someday in the future, I can be a writer.

My Name is Pallavi

Pallavi stared at a water spot on the window, trying to count the streetlights that whipped past the car. She had forgotten her headphones, so she alternated between staring out the window and pretending to be asleep. Unfortunately, when her eyes were closed, the only distraction she had from the yelling was her own thoughts.

How long could she procrastinate on her AP World History paper? She was supposed to write about what she thought was the most significant modern-day impact of World War II. She wasn't sure yet whether the answer was nuclear energy or the emergence of the superpowers, but she knew she'd need to pull an all-nighter to finish her essay. What's the lowest possible grade she could make on her Pre-Calculus test in order to keep an A in the class? Did the homecoming dress she and her mom bought last weekend make her look fat? How many of the girlfriends in her close-knit group would continue to stay in touch after they graduated high school in two years?

Even those worries were not enough to drown out her parents. At this point, they were no longer discussing anything with any logic. Instead, they were hurling hurtful words at each other in Bengali.

"You made Pallavi change schools every year for so long," Ammu choked out through tears. "And now she doesn't talk to us abo—"

"Did you want our children to be—" Abbu interrupted sternly. "Mediocre? She's barely in high school, she doesn't even know what's best for her yet."

"You're heartless. I think I know what's best for my own daughter."

"I know that in *your* family, they're okay with *bandor* children, but not in mine. You will see."

"Not everything in life is about money, *lobhi lok*."

Pallavi bit her lip to keep herself from making any biting comments comparing her parents to those of her friends. She wished they'd put a fork with the meal ("Americanizing it," as they would say) instead of forcing her to stain her fingernails with turmeric. She wished her

parents wouldn't mispronounce words—like the time they said "crossow" instead of "croissant" during a parent teacher conference. (Her teacher subsequently thought that she was practicing archery in her free time instead of eating a common western breakfast). Most of all, she wished desperately that her parents were more like her white friends' parents, who argued behind closed bedroom doors instead of letting their fights run freely in front of their children.

She knew that the real reason they wouldn't consider divorce, like her white friends' parents, wasn't for "the kids." It was due to the isolation her parents—who shared all of the same Bangladeshi friends—would surely to face from the rest of the Bangladeshi community.

When they fought, after the yelling subsided, they would enter the silent stage. In the silent stage, Pallavi would become their messenger owl. More than once, her mother had called her while she was sleeping over at a friend's place, requesting that she relay a message to her father, who was sleeping just a few dozen feet away in the guest room. More than once, her father had called her on his way home from work, asking her for the grocery list, which he knew very well was compiled each week by her mother. More than once, they'd asked her to let the other know to pick up her little brother from school, because they had a flat tire or got caught up in a meeting at work.

If her house had smelled of vanilla extract and dog hair instead of curry and incense and if her parents' skin had been white instead of brown, their arguments would have probably happened out of her sight and earshot. If her parents had named her something like Patricia instead of Pallavi, they would probably already be divorced by now. She tried to imagine what life would be like if her friends at school didn't always replace the soft P at the start of her name with a hard P—the same P that was at the beginning of the words *piss* and *poop*. Even when her parents yelled at her, they kept the P soft, so that it rolled with the rest of her name. Pronounced correctly, Pallavi sounded like the name of a soft and delicate girl instead of one that was clunky and clumsy. It was meant to be a name that fell gracefully from people's mouths, not one that had to be yanked out with force.

Bengali was Pallavi's first language, taught to her by parents who were both professors at a private liberal arts college and were confident that she would pick up English once she started school. Pallavi's mother had been told by doctors that, after her, they were not likely to conceive any more children, so her parents resolved to make sure she learned their native tongue, ensuring that the culture they had brought to America from the other side of the world would not be forgotten. She didn't learn English until she began public school in Kindergarten. The teasing from other children motivated her to learn their language as quickly as possible, and then when even that wasn't enough, to completely expunge the accent from her tongue.

"*Haramjada*," Ammu said, under her breath and with venom in her voice, when she was tired of yelling. Pallavi cracked her eyes open to look at her phone and check the time. They had been on the road for only fifteen minutes, which means that the ride was only half over. She counted the yellow lines that flashed past her on the road until they left an imprint on the inside of her eyelids.

Pallavi had even been coerced into learning how to read and write in Bengali at a very young age with the promises of various gadgets and prizes from her parents with each new accomplishment. A Nintendo DS, on which she had half-heartedly played a game where the objective was to take care of and train dogs, now sat unused in her dresser. When Pulok was almost a year old and could start wrapping his hands around toys and lifting them up, he accidentally snapped the white contraption in half. At nine years old, she had cried for weeks. As someone who was used to being an only child, she had secretly hoped, at the time, that her parents loved her enough to return him to the hospital. A few Webkinz stuffed animals, whose virtual bodies she had once nurtured online and whose physical bodies she brought into bed with her, sat droopily on her dresser. Their heads began to sag as the years had flattened the Styrofoam beads inside of them. Three blonde Barbie dolls that she wanted to look like when she grew up stood tall and tan in a way that she never could. Now, they were strewn in a deserted pastel pink doll house with half of the hair torn out by the little sons of her parents' friends.

Even though Bengali was her first language, there were words that Ammu and Abbu used that she did not understand. Those were the curse words that she had never been taught. Sometimes, if she was feeling particularly motivated, she would pull out the Notes application on her phone and write down (in poorly spelled Bengali) some of the words, to look up later. She couldn't help but be amused by the fact that her prim and proper professor parents had thus introduced her to phrases like *chhatar matha*, which meant *"head of an umbrella,"* or *ghorar deem,* which meant *"egg of a horse."*

Pallavi once again pulled out her phone. Only seven minutes had passed since she last checked. She unlocked the screen and dragged her thumb from the right side to the left, searching for the Notes application for her running list of Bengali curse words and insulting phrases. Once she located it among the jumble of game apps (that she never played and only downloaded because her friends pressured her to), she scrolled down the terms she had transliterated until she came to the one Ammu used earlier.

Right in between *Kuttar bachha: "son of a bitch"* and *Gandu: "asshole"* was *Haramjada: "bastard."* At the end of the list she added *Lobhi lok*, so that she could remember to look it up later—a trick her favorite middle school English teacher had taught her to build stronger reading comprehension skills.

She looked over her list for a little while longer, as she might have reviewed a vocabulary list in school right before an exam. She glanced over at Pulok, who was eight years younger than her and had not forgotten his headphones. His head was resting on the seat so that the headrest, his neck, and the back of his head made a little triangle through which she could see out the window on the other side. He had fallen asleep with his mouth open, and his Adam's apple (which was just beginning to form), made a noticeable movement as he swallowed in his sleep, a visible reminder that he was growing up more quickly than she liked. The deeper his voice got and the more frequently it would crack, the quieter he got at home and the fewer secrets he would share with her.

She remembered the days when she would catch him doing something he wasn't supposed to—like playing video games well into the night on the iPad that he sneakily removed from the game room and replaced before anyone noticed its absence. Pulok knew that Pallavi couldn't bear to see him get punished by their parents, and often took her protectiveness of him for granted. He knew that she would never tell. Even as he grew older and more withdrawn, he still knew that she would always provide him with a place of refuge. There were always times when he would come into her room in the middle of the night when their parents were having a particularly bad fight downstairs, where they thought Pallavi and Pulok couldn't hear them. She would let him sleep in her bed, yearning to protect him from the sobs that shook his skinny body after he thought she had gone to sleep. In the morning, they both woke up with pillows wet with tears.

The car finally came to a halt, parked facing downward on a hill, so that she had to struggle against gravity for a few moments to open the sliding door of the minivan. As a dancer, she had strong legs and core but weak arms. Her brother always took the side with the electric sliding door, so after a few moments of struggling, her dad took mercy on her and stepped out to help drag the stubborn door open.

Before they had left the house that evening, she had come down the stairs only to be met by her mother, whose rage was apparent in her flushed cheeks and clenched jaw.

"In what world is that an appropriate outfit to wear to a *dawat*?" Ammu demanded, her eyes widening in an attempt to be intimidating. As a woman who was merely four feet and eleven inches tall, she often had to take all the power that a little bit more height would have given her and channel it through her furrowed brows and tightly pressed lips. "What will everyone think? Why are you *so* ashamed of your heritage?"

What Ammu didn't know was that she didn't give a damn what Shemonti Auntie or Shajeeb Uncle had to say about her outfit, whose only fault was that it was not brown (the skin

tone, not the color of fabric). Even though it was still 85 degrees at dusk, her outfit was perfectly modest: a short-sleeved baby blue blouse with a relatively high v-neckline that was spattered with pink and orange embroidered flowers, paired with fitted dark-wash denim that stopped just short of her ankles.

While her mother was berating her, Pallavi could see her brother waiting by the front door, dribbling a dirty basketball with his head down. He was wearing denim shorts that, due to his most recent growth spurt, now stopped four inches above his knees, topped with a green cotton t-shirt with a man riding a polo horse embroidered across his chest. At the start of this school year, when he began his journey at a new school at his parents' insistence, the first few drops of rebellious blood started flowing through Pulok's veins. He now refused to let Ammu choose his clothing, before school or before parties.

Her eyes flickered over to Abbu, whose arms were crossed and right foot tapped in impatience. Then, her attention returned to Ammu's face, whose eyes were still slightly bugging out and both of her fists were clenched.

"No," she said, in her most scathing attempt to be a brat. "If I change, I'm changing into pajamas. And then I'm *not* going, in case you hadn't caught that."

"You don't want to spend time with your family?" Now that Ammu realized that she had awakened the post-pubescent rage in her teenage daughter, her tone had softened, ever so slightly.

The truth about these *dawats*—which Pallavi could never get her mother to understand—was that they were about anything *but* spending time with her family. At every one of these parties they attended, while they arrived together, they sat in different rooms that were segregated both by age and by gender. The Abbus were the first called to the buffet line to eat food. Afterwards, they all sat in one room, with their arms crossed and their bellies full of basmati rice, talking of politics, economics, and automobiles. The Ammus all sat in another room, waiting until both their husbands and children had gotten food, comparing their most

recent sari purchases and their children's most impressive accomplishments. The children would all be broken up by age group, and sometimes also by gender, in different bedrooms of the house, playing games or sharing secrets behind closed doors that would never reach their parents' ears.

She rang the doorbell once and, without waiting for an answer, let herself in through the tall, mahogany door that opened to a 15-foot ceiling and cold marble floor. She was greeted first by a scattering of shoes of all kinds right inside of the door, most concentrated right at the entrance and thinning out the farther she traveled inside of the house. She kicked off her own shoes as well, not caring that they landed several feet from each other. Finding them would be a problem for later.

Pallavi traveled through the ground floor of the house, weaving nimbly in and out of the crowd in order to peel off from her family as quickly as possible. As she expected, the moment they arrived, Pulok made a beeline for the room in which he knew his friends would be playing on their PlayStation Portable devices. Despite her best efforts, Pallavi could not avoid the initial pleasantries that were expected of her as the eldest daughter of the family, an expectation that wouldn't be so cumbersome if Pulok would share it with her.

Ammu had managed to locate her in the crowd, and with a firm grasp on her forearm, walked her past the outside sitting room in which all the Uncles had already gathered, talking about Elon Musk's and Donald J. Trump's latest shenanigans, shaming the one Uncle who had been foolish enough to vote for him. They arrived in the living room where the Aunties had chosen to congregate, discussing which saris were most "in" this wedding season and their children's latest accomplishments. Pallavi she said her obligatory *Assalamu-alaikum, Aunties* and her *Ji, bhalo, apni kemon?*s before she had the chance to sprint up the stairs two-at-a-time in search of her friends.

The first door she opened was the wrong one. This bedroom belonged to Atif, a scrawny 10-year-old boy just a few years older than Pulok. As expected, six boys right around the same age were already playing video games on Atif's mounted flat-screen TV, their eyes glued to the war game that Pulok's parents wouldn't let him buy, despite his most vehement tantrums. When she opened the door, the boys—who had all just been enthusiastically yelling at the screen and each other—paused the game.

"Whoops," she said when each of the boys turned their heads to look expectantly at her. "Sorry to interrupt. Have fun!"

Pallavi hadn't been proactive enough this time around to text her friends to make sure they were coming to this particular *dawat*. She'd been bombarded with tests and homework and drama between her school friends over the past couple of weeks. With every door she opened, she grew less and less optimistic that she'd find anyone she both knew and liked.

Finally, she came across a white door with at least half a dozen colorful stickers, ranging from a purple sticker that had SARCASTIC written in a Word Art font to a pink heart that had the words "can u not" etched into it in a typeface that was meant to look like handwriting. There were bits of paint missing on the door where other stickers had been removed. In the middle of the door was taped a piece of notebook paper was taped, with the fringe still attached that read "KEEP OUT (but knock if you have to)" scrawled across it in girly, twisty handwriting. Pallavi wanted to take the piece of paper off the door, rip off the fringe by folding the perforated lines, and then stick it back on. Instead, she knocked softly three times in a spot that wasn't covered by a sticker.

After she'd knocked three times, the giggling on the other side of the door had not subsided. Pallavi inhaled, turned the door handle, and exhaled as she stepped into the room. The deep purple walls made the room feel even smaller as every head turned to face her. Heat pricked at her skin as it traveled up her neck and into her cheeks and, even though she knew that it wouldn't turn her tanned face red, she still felt the embarrassment.

"Oh, hey, Pallavi," said Lamia, whose room it was. Every word she said except for Pallavi's name was pronounced without a trace of a Bengali accent. Even though Lamia was born in Bangladesh, she was just as American as the rest of the kids who were born here in Texas. She was two years older than Pallavi—a senior in high school and the oldest of the crew. "You can totally come in!"

Pallavi had entered what was perhaps the only room in the whole house where boys and girls mixed freely, far from the protective gazes of their parents. Lamia sat with her back against the headboard of her canopied black bed frame and so did her sister Laila, who was Pallavi's age. Laila, as a result of her filial bond with Lamia, had been inaugurated into the older kids' group (even though Pallavi had been grouped with the girls who were her age and a few years younger than her). Everything, starting from the dances that they performed at *Pohela Boishakh* and the Eid *melas* and (now that they were older) the more informal hang outs at movie theaters or shopping malls, was arranged according to these same age groups.

Also sitting on the bed with Lamia and Laila, to round out their girl squad of four best friends, were Nila and Tasnim, who were both the same age. Even though the pair of friends were only a few months apart, Tasnim, who was older, significantly prettier, and always heavily made up, was a sophomore in high school with Pallavi. The aunties always discussed her looks in terms of how non-Bengali she looked. "She looks Iranian! Or Pakistani. She has such beautiful sharp features," they would say, delightedly. "No, she looks Arabic, her skin is fairer than those Pakistani girls." She took every compliment with a genuine smile on her face, accepting that due to the fact that she didn't look Bengali, she was deemed prettier than all of her friends. When they were younger, there were rumors that Tasnim had some debilitating mental disability that had caused her to be held back a year in school. Pallavi thought she may just have been lazy.

Even though she sported slightly crooked teeth, frizzy hair, and never wore makeup, Nila was regarded as the nicest and the smartest of all the girls. With her perfect SAT score and

angelic singing voice (Second Place in the Texas All-State choir competition), she was at the top of her class at the competitive magnet school that was notoriously difficult to get into and renowned for ruining GPAs for Ivy League hopefuls. Already, she was winning awards in both science competitions (where all the future doctors went to prove their worth) and mock trial (where all the future lawyers went to display their nascent knowledge of the law). Everyone was waiting anxiously to see what she decided to do in college.

Asir, with effortlessly shiny hair that swept across his forehead in a perfect wave and skin that never seemed to have broken out throughout adolescence, lay sprawled across the middle of the bed, his head on the pillows at the top of the bed and his feet hanging off the bottom. The two other boys, Farhan (a senior) and Ali (a junior), sat on the floor with their backs against the deep purple wall. With his chocolate skin and long lithe legs, Farhan had been the only boy in the whole Bangladeshi community to make their high school's basketball team, often drawing jokes from all the Uncles sitting downstairs about the prospects of a future NBA career. Ali had a lot of potential to be cute, with hazel eyes and silky dark brown hair. Unlike his friends—who both put in a lot of hours at the gym in order to keep up with the workout habits of their peers and, no doubt, impress the white girls at their respective high schools—he had spent more hours in the kitchen with his mother, who ran a catering business out of their home. Both of the boys had to bend their legs in front of them in order to not hit the bottom of the bed, which was a modern style, and fairly low to the ground.

Lamia, Laila, Nila, and Tasnim had only become friends with the boys their age fairly recently, their two friend groups merging once they had collectively overcome puberty. While they all grew up together and had known each other practically their whole lives, the stigma around male-female friendships and self-inflicted awkwardness had come between all of their interactions. It was only as they grew older and more defiant that their friendships (and, sometimes, relationships beyond friendship) found a space to bloom.

“Guess your other friends didn’t come tonight, huh?” Asir said. “Other friends,” he had said, meaning that he considered them—himself and Pallavi—friends. Pallavi, whose heartbeat began to rise, didn’t realize that about 10 seconds had passed since Asir asked his question until one of Lamia’s eyebrows shot up and the corners of her lips flickered in amusement.

“Oh, um,” Pallavi stammered, her gaze falling to a spot of pink lint on the grey shag rug on the floor. “No, they didn’t come today. I think they were busy, or something. Probably.”

“Asir,” Lamia said, her voice rising a couple of notes above its normal tone. “You’re being so rude. Could you, like, *move* so Pallavi can sit?” As she spoke to him, she reached over to him and gave his shoulder a little push, never once breaking eye contact with him.

“Oh! My bad, Pallavi,” he replied, not looking over at Pallavi either. He drew his legs in and sat cross-legged on the bed, leaning towards Lamia so that his right thigh made contact with her left.

“Oh, no—no worries at all.” Pallavi’s voice had also risen a couple of notes since she had entered the room. “I can just sit on the floor over here.” She blindly pointed at a spot on the floor, only realizing that it was right next to the trash can as her eyes followed the direction her index finger pointed.

“Don’t be silly.” This time it was Laila that piped up, eagerly, as if to assert that, even though they were the same age, she was the one who was invited here. “Come here, come sit,” she said as she patted the now-empty spot with her foot.

Pallavi shrugged and sat on the edge of the spot that had just been offered to her. Not wanting to encroach on anyone else’s space, she lifted only her right leg onto the bed, tucking it beneath her left thigh, forming a triangle shape in which she tucked away her hands which she did not know what to do with. She sat with her back mostly facing Tasnim, twisting her body to be able to make eye contact with everyone in the room.

“Anyways, as I was saying, it is *so* unfair that I have to be *Lamb*-yuh,” said Lamia, her voice still high pitched and preppy-sounding. “And Laila gets to have the pretty name that all the

white people can pronounce. I was the test child so that Laila's life could be as easy as possible. It's ridiculous, really."

"Whatever, Lamb-yuh," said Laila, with feigned annoyance. "That just means Ma and Baba love me more."

"Honestly, probably."

"Okay." This time it was Tasnim, with a tone of finality in her voice, as though no one else's experience on this matter was as important as her own. "None of you guys even *know* what it's like to have a hard name. Try *Taz*-nim. That's not even close to how it's supposed to be pronounced. People usually think I'm a *boy*," she spat out, as though that were the worst thing that could happen to a person.

"Is that why you don't correct people when they just think you're Indian?" Lamia said, with a laugh but also a slight edge in her voice. "We're not Indian, we're Bangladeshi. It's literally a completely different country."

Tasnim paused for a brief second, one of her eyebrows shooting up. "It's not my fault," her voice inflecting at the ends of her sentences. "It's because my school is so *white*. None of my school friends even know what Bangladesh *is*."

"Did y'all know that they used to call Asir *Ass*-sir to make fun of him?" said Laila, interrupting Lamia's next comment. Her momentary fixation on Tasnim's lack of reverence for their culture broke as she once again looked over at Asir and placed her hand tenderly on his shoulder.

"Poor, sweet boy," Lamia said, the corners of her mouth lifting up in adoration.

"Yeah, that was so rough," he said, wiping a fake tear from his face.

"But now he's popular in school, so people don't call him that anymore."

"Who told you that?"

"Alright, alright, that's enough from you two." This time it was Nila who spoke up, with a slight smile on her face.

"Yeah, let's talk about how they *still* call Farhan *Fart*-han on his basketball team because he's the team's best benchwarmer," said Asir in between laughs.

Farhan let out a defensive, "What the hell!" that was drowned out by the laughter of the whole room. As the giggling subsided, Pallavi relaxed, sinking a little further into the bed and letting her back slouch.

"We've been playing a game, Pallavi," piped up Tasnim again. Out of everyone, she was the only one who said her name with an American accent, with a heavy emphasis on the P. "Pall," like "mall," "uh" like a pause in a speech, "vee" like TV, just like her school friends said it. "Do you wanna play, too?"

"Um," this gave her some pause. She had never exactly trusted Tasnim. Her heavily filled-in eyebrows made her look mean. "Yeah, sure, I'm down."

"It's called Truth-or-Dare. I'm sure you've heard of it, right?"

The heat in her cheeks that had mostly subsided began to rise again. "I mean, yes. Of course I have."

"Tasnim," warned Nila. "C'mon, don't be mea—"

"Okay, well," interrupted Tasnim. "We've all already gone, so I guess it's your turn."

"Okay, um." Pallavi weighed her options. On one hand, if she picked truth, that was generally the safer option. On the other hand, what's the worst they could make her do? These were, mostly, people she had known her whole life. "I guess I choose." She paused. "Dare."

Tasnim pressed her lips together for a moment, but just a moment, because she wanted to be the one to assign a task to Pallavi. Before anyone else got the chance, she said with a smirk, "I dare you to take Ali and go in there." She was pointing through the open door of Lamia's bathroom, which was painted a pale pink color and had makeup, nail polish, and toiletries scattered across the sink counter. "For at least seven minutes."

A lump rose in her throat. Once, at a party she had attended in eighth grade, the attendees were playing a game of "seven minutes in heaven." During the duration of that party,

she had hidden away from that room, as she didn't want her first kiss to happen because of a game. Over the course of the following two weeks, she made it her mission to secure her first kiss, and she had succeeded. The problem was that she didn't want her second kiss to be during a game either.

Ali was already laboring to rise up from his spot on the floor. She heard a few of his joints cracking.

Not seeing anywhere to run, she had no choice but agree.

"Um, okay. That's fine, I guess."

Nila's lips were pressed firmly together, indicating her disapproval but also that no further words of protest were going to escape her lips. Pallavi's eyes met Tasnim's, whose face was now not merely a smirk, but a whole toothy grin. Pallavi slowly edged herself off of the bed and lifted herself onto her feet. Ali was already walking into the restroom, throwing glances over his shoulder to make sure that she was still coming.

He held the door open for her and she gingerly walked in behind him. She turned around to face him as he closed the door behind him. He started to open the door to the area that had the toilet and shower. "Shall we? So they don't hear us?"

"Oh, no." She gave a nervous laugh. "I don't really wanna go in there." Her eyes met his. "Sorry," she added.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Fine by me."

He placed his hands on her waist, but she leaned back, making a 45-degree angle with his body. He leaned in over her body, in order for his lips to meet hers. Her face was in a grimace, so his lips met her teeth. He drew back his head and came back with his mouth open even further, attempting to meet her lips with his. This time, his teeth also met hers and, within a few seconds, there was slobber all over her lower lip and the upper part of her chin.

"Can we stop?"

He began to step forward. At first, the back of her head butted the wall. Through his lips and saliva, she murmured an ouch.

"Why? Aren't you having fun?"

Again, he did not feel the need to stop.

"Please. Stop."

Slowly, his body inched closer to the wall, almost as if her body weren't in the way. Her shoulder blades met the wall. And then, her lower back met the door knob of the linen closet. The door knob dug into the small of her back as he hooked his fingers into her belt loops and pressed his groin against hers.

Zzz. Zzzzz. Zzz. Zzzzz.

The particular ringtone she had set to indicate a call from a family member emanated from her phone, creating a space between them that she hadn't been able to force by herself.

She placed her hands on his chest and pushed him off of her. She reached into her pocket and, indeed, it was her mother calling, which usually indicated that they were ready to leave.

"Shit, I need to get this."

She fumbled for a moment with the lock and doorknob before her body could spill out of that God-forsaken bathroom and, without a word, out of the deep purple room. She didn't even care to notice whether the group's eyes followed her out of the room. She wanted only to be anywhere else.

Without ever even answering the phone, she bolted down the wooden stairs, two at a time, almost slipping and falling in her socks. All that stood between her and the car that would take her and her family home was a scattering of shoes of all kinds, thin enough to wade through easily where she was standing on the last step of the stairs. The further she traveled and the closer she got to freedom, the thicker the sea of shoes became. She scanned all of the shoes, searching for her own, wishing desperately that she hadn't kicked them off so carelessly when she'd arrived at the house.

She didn't see the brightly-colored highlighter green and blue basketball shoes that her brother had worn among the remaining shoes of the guests. Her family had already gone into their car. She knew her mother would have wanted her to say goodbye to Lia Auntie before she left, but she didn't care. She spotted her right shoe, with the brown, dirt-stained bottom exposed, lying by the bottom of the staircase. She lunged for it.

When she had almost reached the door, miraculously without tripping, she looked up and behind her at the second-floor mezzanine. Ali stood there, his lips pressed into a straight line and his jaw clenched. The pace of her heartbeat increased as she returned her gaze to the ground in search of her shoes. She spotted her left shoe, slipped her foot into it without fully putting it on and, still clutching the right one to her chest, frantically turned the doorknob and stepped outside to happily let the warm, humid night swallow her.

The moment of relief and anonymity she felt in the night was brief. As soon as she stepped outside, her Abbu pulled up, interrupting the dark to flash the headlights in her face. She made the walk up the carefully curated pebble path on the perfectly manicured lawn that she did not dare step on, making it to her family's car. As expected, her brother was on the automatic door side of their minivan, so she had to struggle with the manual function of the door on her side before she could pile herself into the van.

On the way home, it seemed as though her parents had used all their words on their peers at the party and they did not have any left. The whole ride was silent, and Pallavi was left, as she would have wanted, to lean her head against the window and watch the other cars' headlights as they passed with an irregular beat. Pulok had his headphones in but, this time, it didn't matter that she had forgotten hers. She wished that the water that dribbled down the side of the window could wash away the interaction she had just had.

The ride home, due to the lack of arguing, seemed a lot shorter than the ride there, despite her tiredness and her yearning to get in her bed and put on her most comforting Netflix

show to lull her to sleep. Normally, by the time they pulled into their particularly steep driveway, she would be asleep and need to be shaken awake by her Abbu and, sometimes, even half supported back into her bedroom so that she could sleep in her own bed.

This time, however, she was wide awake as they pulled into their driveway and, the moment her father parked the car and pressed his foot into the parking brake, she pulled the car door handle, and let the door open itself into the dark night. They had forgotten to turn on their garage light before they had left so, once again, the darkness of the night swallowed her whole, just as she had wanted it to. She used the entirety of her weight to shut the sliding door on her side of the minivan and ran inside before anyone could strike up a conversation with her.

She threw off her shoes into the shoe closet where she would have normally taken care to place them exactly where they were supposed to. She bounded up the stairs, two-at-a-time, into her room. As soon as she got in there and locked the door behind her, she began to throw her clothes off her body, hoping that with them would come the remnants of Ali and the night. The first thing to come off were her skin-tight skinny jeans, which she unbuttoned and peeled off her legs as fast as they would come off.

Pallavi was standing in front of her vanity, in front of which she had left the makeup she had used for the night scattered on the table in her hastiness to get ready earlier. She began tidying up, making sure every eyeshadow, eyeliner, mascara, concealer, and powder was back in the drawer in which it belonged.

In the large mirror of her vanity, she noticed a bright purple bra strap peeking out underneath the short-sleeved baby blue blouse with a v-neckline that was spattered with pink and orange embroidered flowers that she had worn despite her mother's chastisement. It was a little bit small for her, having been purchased late in elementary school from a department store at the mall they still frequented. At the time, it was large for her prepubescent body, which had not yet filled out. Now, the stitch at her waist accentuated the curve of her figure and the new fullness of her breasts.

As she stood in front of the mirror in just her top and underwear, the shirt was so tight and she had gained so much weight over the past few years that the outline of her bra was clearly visible through the cotton of the shirt, and the v-neckline revealed a tiny bit more cleavage than she probably should have. The body of the shirt was now form-fitting and revealed her figure, leaving less of it to the imagination. And the strap that was peeking out—had it been showing this whole time?

Perhaps she should have listened to her Ammu, who was more experienced with womanhood. Perhaps her mother had had experiences in her life through which she understood the kinds of things that happen to girls who wear blouses and jeans that are too tight to *dawats* against their mother's wishes. She thought about telling her mother what had happened but seemed too risky. What if she didn't believe her? What if she believed her and punished her anyways (because, Ammu, after all, had been right)? Either way, it wasn't worth it.

No longer wanting any of the remnants of the night's experience to be touching her skin, she grabbed the shirt by the bottom and started to pull it over her head. It easily peeled off of her skin until it reached her chest. She found that not only were her arms stuck above her head and the shirt was stuck at her chest, but also she could not see because the shirt was obstructing her vision. Feeling trapped, she began to squirm her shoulders and grab the bottom of her shirt, which was now above her head, with the bits of her hands that she could move. But, no matter how hard she pulled, she wasn't able to get the fabric past her chest and over her head.

Her heart rate became faster and faster and the space created by the fabric of the blouse felt more and more enclosed with each passing minute. Her wrists had a little bit of mobility, with which she once again grabbed the ends of the shirt. This time, she found the two small slits on the sides of the shirt that were a part of the style. She held onto the fabric on either side of the slit on the left side of her body and pulled apart as hard as she could until she heard the distinct sound of fabric ripping. She kept going until the slit reached her armpit, got the shirt over her head, and—with one giant exhale—threw it off of herself.

Normally, she wouldn't leave any piece of clothing or trash lying on her floor. Her room, even if her school work or planner weren't, was always in immaculate condition. But she really did not want to touch the fabric that reminded her of what had happened earlier.

She rushed to her bedroom door and shut it, turning the lock even though she wasn't allowed to. She turned to her bed and whipped open the floral purple and blue blanket she had had since elementary school so that she could get inside and cover her entire body with it. She laid in her bed and lifted the blanket over her head, protecting herself from everything that might be outside the shield it provided her. Once again, she inhaled. But this time, with her exhale came a heaving sob and tears spilling from her eyes and onto her pillow. As her pillow collected a pool of her salty tears, she let herself drift into a fitful sleep.

Pink City

"Ammu! I *know* I see my friends all the time back home," whined Ishika.

Her parents were not happy with the persistent request she'd layered on top of their jetlag ever since they had landed in Dhaka—three days ago—after the thirty-six-hour journey from Chandler, Arizona. Her friends from back home were all taking trips to Bangladesh this summer for a variety of reasons—such as returning to their parents' childhood country for family weddings, long-planned trips to visit grandparents and extended family, or even a few funerals. It wasn't shocking that Ishika's friends were also making trips to Bangladesh; most Bangladeshi-American families made the trek back to Bangladesh every few years or so. However, this was the first time Ishika's family vacation had perfectly aligned with that of her friends, putting them all in Bangladesh at the exact same time. The prospect of seeing her friends, who she saw nearly every weekend back home in Chandler, halfway across the world gave her a sense of excitement that she couldn't quite put into words to her parents. She remembered once that she tried to go on a road trip to University of Arizona just two hours away with her best friend Zarah and her older brother, who went to school there and would be driving. Her parents put their feet down. But this opportunity to see her friends in a different country would be almost as good as going on a trip with them.

"I just *have* to see them, Ammu!" she exclaimed, tears brimming. "Tumi *keno* bujhte parteso na?" *Why aren't you understanding me?*

"It is unsafe for girls to go outside here without their parents, *Mamoni*," her dad tried to explain.

"It's *not* unsafe, Baba. Irfan gets to go outside by him*self*. How is that fair? Nabila's driver and bodyguard are going to be there!"

Her sixteen-year-old brother, Irfan, was laying on the bed in the guest room in their grandparents' home. It was a small room for the four of them. The usual arrangement was that Ishika and her mother got the bed and Irfan and their father got the mattress makeshift cot on the floor. He had his headphones in, offering to help as she tried to plead her case to her

parents. Not that he would have shared her perspective, anyways. Being a boy who excelled at school as well as in all of his extracurricular activities, such as piano and soccer, Irfan got a free pass when it came to the freedom to go hang out with his friends whenever he wanted or to return home past his flimsy curfew. While she was still not allowed to have sleepovers at her white friends' homes or go to the mall without adult supervision, even at age thirteen, her brother had been allowed to do so since he was ten. In their parents' eyes, he had already succeeded in all of the ways that it was important and had earned the right to have more fun, if that was what he wanted. And he was a *boy*, so that meant that they had to worry about his safety less anyways.

"*Ey*, *meye*," Ammu said, her eyes widened, her eyebrows raised, and her lips pressed into a stern line, pointing her index finger at Ishika. *Hey girl,* she had meant to say, *don't talk to your father like that*.

"*Oof,*" she said in the same exact tone she had heard her mother use every time she'd been frustrated with her. "Zarah's going! Mariam, Sumaiyah, Tanisha! *Everyone's* parents already said yes. Why don't you ever want me to be included?"

Baba began, "We haven't heard any—"

"You can even *call* their parents!" Ishika was already pulling out the phone that had been given to her in case of emergencies. The screen had three prominent cracks running across it—scars it had acquired when her brother had owned it, when it was new. She began scrolling her through her friends' Bangladeshi numbers, which she'd already loaded into her contact book. Her eyebrows raised to show her parents that she was serious, she held her phone screen toward them. "See? Go ahead, call them!"

"*Aasthe*, Ishika," her Ammu said in a whisper-yell that was louder that Ishika's voice. "Your Dada Bhai and Dadu Moni can hear you!"

Her Ammu was always extra cautious while visiting her in-laws' home; she chose every word and action carefully for fear of getting blamed, once again, for any inconvenience faced by

Ishika's father, the favored and most successful child of his family. Ishika's paternal grandparents had never hesitated to scold her Ammu for any perceived shortcoming that they deemed unbecoming of their favorite son's wife. For this reason, she always liked to split her time during her visits to Bangladesh between her in-laws' and her own parents. (Unfortunately, her parents, Ishika's Nana Bhai and Nanu Moni, were out of the country this year, visiting Ishika's youngest uncle who worked as a civil engineer in Dubai.)

"I don't care! I'm thir*teen* no—"

Ammu raised her right hand sharply as if she were about to strike, causing Ishika to flinch, but her hand stopped in mid-air. (She never actually went through with it.) Her nostrils flared momentarily as she let out a short huff. She stuck out her hand, gesturing for the phone, her eyebrows and mouth still pasted in the same stern positions as before. The corners of Ishika's mouth flickered, but she knew better than to break into a smile now. She took a few steps forward and gingerly placed her cracked phone in her mother's hand.

Ammu held the phone a considerable distance from her face. She still had her eyebrows raised and her chin held up, but this time, it to peer through the bottom part of her bifocal lenses to read the screen. As often happened when she was concentrating, her eyebrows slowly moved toward each other, an expression that she'd adopted, at first, as a way to express a warning sign to her children, but which had now become a habit. Finally, she came to the contact for Nabila, having scrolled past it three times. She tapped on the contact and hit the call button, her acrylic thumbnail making a clicking noise against the screen as she did so.

"Hello, Nabila," she said, her tone transformed into the saccharine *Shuddho Bangla,* Proper Bengali, that she often reserved for anyone but her family. "Will you give the phone to your Ammu or Abbu?"

After a moment, she began in her overly-cheerful tone, "Hello, *Slaamalaikum,* Afreen Bhabi? Yes, Ishika keeps telling me about this outing you all have planned! Are you or Javed Bhai going to be there?" There was a pause, muffled talking from the other line. Ammu was

examining her nails. “Oh okay, you have both a body guard and a driver that’s going to be with them the whole time. I see! Yes, that sounds great!” Another pause. Every time Ammu stopped talking, while she listened to the muffled talking from the other line, her lips were set into a straight line and curved to one side as though she were unamused. Excitedly, again, she said, “Yes, we’d love to come over sometime! Next time you’re in Chandler visiting your brother, if you don’t come by our house, I will be very upset!” Pause, muffled talking from the other line and some laughter that was met with a chuckle from Ammu’s end. This time, she raised one eyebrow and made eye contact with Ishika, as though in warning for her not to get her hopes up. “*Theek achhe,*” or “Okay then,” she said with a subtle sigh, as she often did when she was trying to draw a conversation to a close. “Text us the address. Oookay! *Slaamalaikum,* Bhabi, we’ll see each other soon!” She hung up the phone by tapping the red X button at the bottom of the screen about twelve times more than she needed to, making that little click of her nails against the glass screen each time.

“*Khushi?*” *Happy?* Finally, Ishika allowed her smile to break free of the carefully neutral expression she had maintained throughout the phone call, no longer able to contain her excitement.

The next morning, she was getting into the car with her new embroidered *Nakshi* satchel that her Dadu Moni had their maids hand-sew for her. It was loaded up with three shades of lip gloss, extra mascara, a little baggie of chanachur and a sandwich (which Dadu Moni wouldn’t let her leave the house without), her cell phone and a charger (“just in case.”) At her mother’s insistence, the whole time they were in Bangladesh, she was always forced to carry a MUM brand water bottle, since her American digestive system was not accustomed to handling Bangladeshi water. She was also instructed to carry hand sanitizer and baby wipes to clean her hands if ever she needed to use the restroom away from home. All of these items jangled and crackled together as she adjusted to her seat in the back of the sedan. She pushed away the head

of an umbrella that was poking her in the side, which was more difficult than it should have been due to the presence of two carry-on suitcases stuffed into the backseat. She grimaced slightly, disgusted by the fact that the wheels of the suitcases that had touched the dirty floors of airports all over the world were facing her, mere inches away.

Ammu and Abbu had made Irfan accompany her because they were grabbing a late breakfast with some of their old friends from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, the most prestigious higher education institution in the whole country. They had both attended BUET for bachelor's degrees before they were married, and then immigrated to the United States (her father for grad school and her mother for her father). Even though their breakfast wasn't for another hour, Dhaka's unpredictable traffic patterns and its drivers' complete disregard for lanes or lights made their commutes of even just a few miles last for hours.

As she sat in the car waiting for Irfan, she noticed how much less cluttered this garage was than the one they had back home, which was full of untidily stacked plastic tubs full of old clothing they'd never gotten around to donating and cardboard boxes filled with both Ishika and Irfan's school work from kindergarten on. The driver stood right outside of the garage, smoking a cigarette and chatting with the tea stall owner on the side of the road. The longer she waited, the more her skin stuck to the leather seats; even though the air conditioning was on inside the car, it was no match for Dhaka's insufferable humidity. Her left arm also began sticking to the car door that she was leaning on to get away from the wheels of the luggage. After having waited for about ten minutes, she placed her hand on the door handle as she contemplated going back upstairs to the air-conditioned living room to just wait there. She was waiting in the car for almost ten minutes before Irfan decided to come downstairs.

He'd obviously just woken up. The thick curly black hair that he'd inherited from their mother was ruffled on one side, and his eyes were slightly swollen. He had barely bothered to get dressed, as he was in his black and white Adidas sweatpants and Nike slides that exposed his

uncut toenails. Ishika could see his rib cage through the holes in his ratty t-shirt. As an incentive for dropping her off, Irfan had been promised a trip to a bootleg CD and DVD store immediately afterward. When he got into the passenger seat (which was located in the left side in Bangladesh), he immediately lifted the lever that allowed him to push back the seat to give himself as much leg room as possible, rolling straight back into Ishika's toes. She let out a soft yelp.

"Mm," he grunted, as he rested his head on the seat, put in his white Apple headphones, and closed his eyes. "My bad."

On the way over, while Irfan dozed off and began to drool, Ishika looked out the window at this country that her parents were from, but which she never felt fully connected to. The people standing on every street corner were either waiting to cross the street or waiting for pedestrians to cross out of their residences to ask them for money. People in various conditions of raggedness and various levels of misery begged passersby for money so that they could afford to feed their families for the day. A woman who was missing a tooth wore a sari with no blouse, exposing her bony right shoulder, stood near the corner. She had her hands outstretched to no one in particular, turning feebly when someone would walk past ignoring her. Three little boys in tank tops that had turned permanently grey ran between pedestrians' legs, tugging on their *ornas* and t-shirts while looking up at them expectantly. They looked to be about ages five to seven, but they were so malnourished that they could have been a few years older and Ishika wouldn't have been able to tell.

When she was younger, at her insistence, her parents would give her paisa coins and taka bills to hand to the homeless people that they encountered. Now, she had more or less accepted that the world was just this way. She'd resolved to live her life in a way that showed she was thankful for the sustenance that she had and the life that her parents could afford to provide her with. Often, she told beggars that she was *so* sorry, but she didn't have any money on her. Often, she smiled sympathetically in their general direction while avoiding meeting their eyes, dreading

the tightening feeling in her chest that accompanied seeing the hunger and pain in their eyes. Still, her parents used the conditions of those hundreds of hungry people in their home country to their advantage, never hesitating to guilt her for any morsel of wasted food. When she was little and a much pickier eater—existing solely on a diet of blended lentils, rice, and store-bought dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets—the only way for her parents to make her finish all the food on her plate was to invoke the guilt brought on by the conditions of those hundreds of hungry people in their home country.

They were entering the Baridhara neighborhood in which her friend Nabila lived. The landscape outside the car was immediately transformed upon passing through the gated entrance separating the neighborhood from the scenes of poverty they had just driven past. In a city that was otherwise filled with high-rise apartment style housing, there were whole houses that were inhabited by single families and surrounded by white fences. The homes were made with lightly colored bricks that, if they weren't frequently cleaned, would quickly have become grey and bedraggled with pollution. Many of the homes displayed different flags outside as indicators of the residences of various diplomats from around the world. Security cameras craned their necks at any motion of passersby.

After a series of twists and turns on roads that were paved and not littered with trash, they arrived at a pale pink brick house with both a Bangladeshi flag and an American flag hanging from two posts. The front door of the house was at least three times Ishika's height. There was a guard posted at the black iron fence outside the property and another posted at the front door. The driver pulled up to one of the guards and rolled down his window.

"I have Ishika in the car," he said, in a dialect of Bengali that was generally spoken in the villages and not in Dhaka. "She is here to see Nabila, and I'm here to drop her off."

"Wait here," said the austere-looking guard.

The guard bent his neck down in a way that gave him a triple chin in order to speak into the mouthpiece of the radio that was attached to his left shoulder, pinching the buttons on the

side of the device with his left hand while still clutching his gun with his right. Ishika saw the second guard on the inside put two fingers to his ear, nod a couple of times, and then talk into his radio device in the same way as the first guard. He waited a few moments after he stopped talking to pinch the device and speak into it, and this time, the first guard put two fingers to his left ear. Without a change of expression on his face, he nodded at her driver and punched in a 7 - digit code to open the iron gate and allow their car onto the property.

The second guard opened the door and Nabila came rushing out—bare-footed, but still dressed in a very fashionable pair of light-wash jeans and trendy *fotuwa* that Ishika had seen in a fashion magazine that her grandma kept in their living room. Ishika opened the car door and leapt out, almost leaving behind her embroidered satchel in her excitement. She turned around quickly to grab the bag, which jangled as expected, and shut the door to the car again.

"Eeeek!" Nabila said, squealing with excitement just as Ishika remembered she was prone tot. "It's so good to see you!"

Nabila had moved away three years ago, leaving her life in Chandler to return to the country of her birth after years of absence. Her father's family's garments factory business was really taking off, and it made the most sense for their whole family to relocate to Bangladesh, unfortunately for the girls. While the quality of their lives improved in many ways due to their newfound wealth, the freedoms they took for granted in America, such as being able to go to a shopping mall without a man present or taking a walk outside of their immediate neighborhood, were no longer options for them. Over the course of the past three years, Nabila had returned to visit Chandler only once. She had brought for her friends a huge trash bag filled with trendy shirts and samples of clothing that were sent to H&Ms all throughout America and Europe, that were once destined to end up in some other preteen girls' closets.

They ran back towards the house, arm-in-arm, Ishika's other arm struggling to keep her satchel from bouncing around too much at her hip. In just the few moments that it took them to get from the car to the house, she already felt droplets of sweat forming on her skin. The

sweltering humid heat was so unlike the dryness she was used to back home. After walking through the impossibly tall door, she saw that there were six pairs of shoes neatly lined up by the door. Her friends had all beat her here, and she imagined it was because they all lived in areas that were closer to Baridhara. Her grandparents' flat was in Rampura—a more rundown area of Dhaka—which she avoided telling her friends by feigning ignorance about the names of the different neighborhoods. She noticed, outside, that Nabila's family had several, all of which looked to be imported. There were two Mercedes, an Audi, and a Chevy Camaro, all well-kept and spotless right inside the gate to their property. Ishika thought of the humble Toyota Camry sitting in her grandparents' garage, spattered with dirt and dust, and felt a burst of self-consciousness at the unfavorable comparison.

Upon entering the house, the first thing she noticed was the cold blast of the air conditioning that sent a chill down her spine. The air conditioning at this house, unlike at her grandparents', didn't make a noise or stop when the electricity inevitably went out every few hours. The sound was smooth and, if the electricity did ever go out, there was a generator to ensure that the Khan family suffered no inconvenience. Ishika noticed many features in this house that her mother, an architect and custom homes enthusiast, would have marveled at. The home had the he highest ceiling she had ever seen. On each side of a marbled floor, two curved and mirrored staircases each led to their own corridors on the second story. Above them, from a distance that seemed as lofty as the sky itself, dangled a massive and intricate crystal chandelier that sparkled in the light.

The moment she came in through the door and knelt down to take off her shoes (as was customary in all Bangladeshi households), a maid appeared from a small room underneath the staircase to offer her a fluffy white house slipper before her foot could touch the cold marble floor. There were giggling sounds coming from deeper inside of the house and Nabila, after getting her fluffy white slippers on, barely waited to run off to join the other girls.

In the kitchen, there was a whole spread of Deshi snacks as well as their favorite American snacks laid out for them. *Chanachur* and *muri* were laid out in fine gold-leaf decorated china right next to their favorite Flamin' Hot Cheetos, which was next to a plate heaped with fresh-baked brownies and a large bowl of vanilla ice cream. All of the girls were sitting around the dining table, talking and laughing. She noticed Coach and Michael Kors purses slung on the backs of the chairs her friends were sitting in. She looked down at her *Nakshi* satchel and the hand-embroidered threads no longer looked as exquisite in comparison. Nabila wore gold stud earrings in the shape of the famous Chanel logo with the backward and forward Cs facing away from each other. Ishika suddenly remembered that she had forgotten to even wear earrings this morning, but if she had, would have worn the small golden hoops she had purchased from Claire's with the money she had earned through selling home baked cookies at school.

"I'm going to take, like, ten or fifteen *fotuwas* back home," said Mariam, the oldest of the group. Her permanently straightened hair lay stiffly down her back, even while she gesticulated wildly and talked about all of her shopping expeditions. "Brown fashion is pretty in now, so I'll even wear them to school."

"That'll be really awesome," complimented Zarah, the person Ishika was most grateful to see. Zarah was one year older than Ishika and was her closest friend. Ishika had a hard time making friends at her school. But her parents had a whole community's worth of Bangladeshi people, none of whom had family in Chandler, that congregated like magnets. Since most of the members of this immigrant community did not have family in Chandler, they became each other's aunts, uncles, and cousins. These friends, just as some of the people at her school had known each other since they were toddlers, had basically been with her since she was in the cradle. Their mothers had all been with each other through their pregnancies and thrown each other surprise baby showers and welcomed each other's children with balloons and stuffed animals at the Chandler Presbyterian Hospital.

She reached for the Flamin' Hot Cheetos the moment she sat down at the table. Before touching them, she stopped and dug through her satchel for her hand sanitizer to de-germ her hands before putting them anywhere near her mouth. With her freshly sanitized hand, she piled the Cheetos into one of the empty bowls. For the first few, she clapped her hands together to get rid of the red food-colored Cheeto dust on her fingers. The farther along she got, the more enthusiastically she began to lick her own fingers to get the dust off.

Thirsty, she wandered to the sink, suddenly comfortable enough to open and close the grant mahogany cabinet doors in order to find the cups. Finding crystal glasses, she took one of them and filled it up at the stainless-steel sink—which was spotless and rust free, unlike the one at her grandparents' house. She wasn't that thirsty, so she filled up the cup halfway and rushed back to the table while taking the first few sips, worried she was missing any of the hottest gossip. When she got back, they were on a totally new topic.

"So, do you really have a boyfriend?" Sumaiyah asked Mariam, mesmerized. Mariam raised a heavily tweezed eyebrow and batted an overly lined eyelid flirtatiously.

"You *promise* not to tell any of your parents?" Mariam asked, mysteriously. She spun around the room, meeting the eyes of every girl sitting around the table. Her gaze lasted a few seconds longer on Tanisha, who was the youngest of the group, having only finished one year of middle school. She had been inducted into their friend group after having gone through puberty a little earlier than normal, leaving her unable to relate to the younger friend group that she belonged to before. However, since she was the youngest, she still hadn't quite shown just how capable she was of keeping secrets and she had definitely not yet done anything scandalous enough to leverage as blackmail in exchange for her silence.

They all nodded furiously, eyes wide with curiosity.

"Yeah. I, like, kinda do have a boyfriend."

"Is he white?" asked Zarah, never afraid to ask the tough, hard-hitting questions—the ones that really mattered.

"No, he's black. My parents would *never* approve," Mariam said, almost proudly.

Ishika prepared in her head some similarly hard-hitting questions she would ask when the rest of them were done asking their own questions. Have they held hands already? Kissed? But now that the other girls had expressed intrigue into her love life, words more and more quickly began spewing out of Mariam's mouth. Without prompting, Mariam had gone into about the first time her boyfriend hugged her in front of her mom. She had gone stiff, which was a fact she had used to convince her mom that she didn't want to be hugged by him. It was also a fact that caused the first fight between her and her boyfriend, who didn't understand why she was too ashamed of him to tell her parents about their relationship.

Ishika remembered the time that her extended family in Bangladesh found photos of her wearing shorts. For a while, it was the talk of her family, with certain members calling her nasty names behind her immediate family's back and other members rushing to her defense. Her parents were mortified about the whole thing and, shortly after, raided her room and removed all the shorts and "scandalous" clothing that were hidden in the corners of her dresser drawers. Shyly, she blurted out, "How does you hide pictures of them from her mom on Facebook?"

Mariam's mouth was open as she turned her head to look at Ishika, still in the middle of answering one of the other girls' questions. Ishika's heart beat rose a little bit, until Mariam's face broke out into a proud smile.

"Oh, my god, it is *so* important to hide everything!" Mariam exclaimed. "I'll show you," she said as though she were explaining a mathematical concept to a class she was teaching.

"Show them what?" asked Nabila's mom, Afreen Auntie, speaking playfully with a thick Chittagong accent in her Bengali. She stood at the entryway of the kitchen, dressed in a trendy cotton *salwar kameez* that was a bright magenta color with pink lipstick to match. Underneath, instead of a *salwar*, she wore blue skinny jeans. She was wearing thick yellow-gold cuffs on each wrist and the same Chanel earrings that Nabila had on.

"Oh, um," Mariam said, nervously. She switched to Bengali. "I was going to show them this store that I bought a bunch of *fotuwas* that I'm taking back home!"

"Okay, sounds good," she said with the smirk of someone who didn't quite believe the story she had just been fed. "Will you take me, Mariam baby? So I can look young like you ladies, too?"

Mariam chuckled and her shoulders relaxed. She said, "Of course, Afreen Auntie! Are we going now? I'm ready to start shopping."

Outside of the house, the girls eagerly waited in the heat to pile into a car. Ishika didn't know about the other girls, but she could already feel a drop of sweat traveling down the trench in the middle of her back. Despite the fact that there were six girls, only one driver stood around, dressed in a black polo tucked into grey slacks as he waited to drive them around. All six of the girls began to pile into the car, the tallest out of them all sitting in the front seat and the smallest girl sitting in her lap. Three of them, one by one, went into the back seat, leaving no room for Ishika. The driver also climbed into the driver's seat on the right-hand side of the car. Afreen Auntie stood at the door with one hand on her hip and the other on her cheek with a smile plastered on her face.

Ishika, whose parents often left her and her brother at home during their trips to Bangladesh in order to save money, had been here to visit the least amount of times out of all of the girls. She looked back at Afreen Auntie nervously, but she was showing no signs that anything was out of the ordinary.

"Ishika," Zarah said, every syllable choppy, the way her mother often said it when they were running late certain mornings when it took Ishika a little longer than usual to get her eyeliner on perfectly. "What are you doing? Get in the car."

"What do you mean? There's no room. How are we going to wear our seatbelts?"

"Oof!" she exclaimed, furrowing her brow. "Ishika, it'll be fine. No one wears seatbelts in Bangladesh. The cars don't even go fast enough to hurt anyone!"

"Mmm. Well, okay." Gingerly, Ishika got into the back seat of the Mercedes with her back side first, then her legs. Everyone shifted in their own seats to accommodate her. It took her three tries to close the door, but she was finally able to slam it shut. It was such a tight squeeze that the door dug into her hip, and she almost wished that she had wedged her satchel between herself and the door. With her other hand, she tightly held the handle that hung from the ceiling of the car, trying to relieve weight from the leg painfully shoved against the door.

Once the door was shut, the driver turned the key in the ignition to rev up the engine and back out of the iron gate which opened automatically for them as they left the premises. Unfortunately, even a few minutes into their drive out of the neighborhood, he did not turn on the radio or any music. After a few seconds of unbearable silence, Ishika piped up. "So, are we going to Bashundhara City or something?"

"Bashundhara? No way, no one shops there," said Nabila, eager to divulge the knowledge that she had gained as a Bangladeshi resident, speaking as though her three years of experience had given her a lifetime of wisdom. "All the really creepy guys go to Bashundhara."

"Oh, yeah," said Sumaiyah. "I went there a couple of days ago, and when I was on the bottom floor there and looked up, there was just, like, over a *thousand* brown dudes looking—no—*staring* at me."

"They do that to everyone, Sumaiyah," Zarah said, laughing. "Did you think you were special?"

"Um, no," Sumaiyah replied.

"Oh my god, yeah," giggled Mariam. "The absolute best part is that, while they stare at girls' asses, they hold hands. With each *other*! That would literally never happen in America. All my school friends laughed their asses off when I told them over FaceTime." That was met with giggles and nods of agreement from all the girls.

"My bad. Um. So, then, where *are* we going?" Ishika asked, knowing she would have to text her overprotective mother her whereabouts as soon as they got to their destination.

"We're going to Pink City," Nabila stated, matter-of-factly.

"Oh, yeah!" chimed in Tanisha, for the first time in a while. "That's in Gulshan. Everything in Gulshan is better!"

Ishika didn't enjoy shopping. Even back home, convincing her to go on a trip to the mall took much coercing from her mother as well as, most of the time, a promise to the mall's food court afterwards. There were too many choices to be made and, since Ishika was raised with her father's frugal habits, she felt pressure to spend every penny as efficiently as possible. On top of that, dressing rooms made her uncomfortable, and she often opted to buy loose fitting clothes in generic colors so that she would not have to try them on. As such, her mom never forced her to go shopping in Bangladesh, where the malls were crowded, and shoppers routinely haggled with store owners to get the price they wanted. Instead, she hung out with her dad and brother, who frequented bootleg CD and DVD stores, visited historical monuments, or roamed around the city trying different street food until one of them fell ill from the Bangladeshi cuisine that their stomachs, pampered by years of American food, revolted against. She made a mental note to ask her mom whether or not she usually shopped at Pink City.

As the drive continued, the girls chatted about their families, boys back home, clothes they wanted to buy, and foods they wanted to try, speaking extra loudly to drown out the air conditioning that blasted through the car. Sumaiyah, whose mother didn't allow her to eat too much sugar, was really looking forward to trying Mövenpick, a Swiss ice cream that became very popular among the youth in Dhaka. Zarah and Nabila had already been, and they suggested that Cream & Fudge was probably more worth her taka, as it was less overpriced and more *Bangali*—Sumaiyah could get Mövenpick elsewhere, but Cream & Fudge was only available to experience in Dhaka.

They all swapped stories about their respective visits to Dhaka thus far. They all had stories about the creepy men they had encountered on the streets. They also all had stories about their grandmothers lamenting that they had gotten tan since the last time they had seen each other, and they were so much prettier when they were fairer-skinned. However, out of all of them, Ishika was the only one who had gone to the Shahid Minar, the Swadhinata Stambha, and the Savar.

Forty-five minutes later, they arrived at the entrance of Pink City. On one side of the pale pink building that was once a more vibrant shade, "Gulshan Pink City" was scrawled in pop-out letters and a silver metallic material. Directly outside sitting in standstill traffic, there were what looked like hundreds of luxury cars, each with a driver holding the door open for his passengers to get out. More than any other place Ishika had visited in Bangladesh, there were people—especially women—dressed in western attire. Form fitting jeans and tops and designer sunglasses, but also trendy *salwar kameez*es and *fotuwa*s, were among the chosen attire of the Pink City patrons.

Their driver stopped the car in the middle of the street in front of the building in order to let them out. He stopped the ignition and got out of the car to open the door for each of them. Making sure to take the keys with him and lock the door behind them, he walked them to directly to the entrance of the mall, all without a word to any of them. Then, as they were entering the building, he turned to Nabila, addressing her respectfully and using the term "*apnar*" instead of "*tomar*," as an adult normally might when speaking to a child.

"You have my number in case you need anything, right?" he asked, almost robotically. "I'll be nearby for when you need to be picked up."

"Yes, I have it." Nabila didn't even look at his face as she spoke and, as though it were scripted, reached into her purse to pull out a 100 Taka bill and handed it to him. "To eat." She, then, swiftly turned and went into the building, the rest of them following her in suit.

Nabila, once they were inside, abruptly turned to face them all so they all had to stop in their tracks. Ishika bumped into Sumaiyah, who was directly in front of her.

Under her breath, she said, in Bengali, "Y'all need to make sure to speak Bangla while we're here, okay? There are a lot of pickpocketers here, since they know that rich people come here. And they target people who they think are kinda dumb, especially *bideshis*. Got it?"

They all nodded, surprised by her sudden sternness, except for Mariam, who responded sarcastically, in Bengali. "*Theek achhe, Ammu,*" she said. "Okay, Mom."

There were a few moments of silence following this interaction, interrupted only with the sounds of traffic and the buzz of people chattering in Bengali all around them. Finally, Zarah took charge and said, "So, Mariam, are you gonna show us where you got those *fotuwa*s?"

Another smirk came from Mariam's direction now that she had regained control of the situation. "Let's go."

With that, she waved her friends forward with her and made a beeline for the second floor, leaving the rest of them to scurry quickly behind in order to catch up.

The more time they spent among the racks of clothing were organized by size and style, the more her satchel began to weigh on her shoulder. The more she examined the price tags to mentally convert the takas to dollars, the more the clothes began to smell of other people's hands and sweat. The longer she listened to her friends gush about colors and designs and fabrics, the more she started to notice the eyes of shameless Bangladeshi men lingering on their bodies, causing her stomach to clench with queasiness.

But Ishika's stomach didn't stop clenching even when the groups of men became disinterested and trailed behind other groups of girls. It tightened and cramped right below her belly button and behind the surface of her skin, almost as though her body was looking, angrily, to expel something she had put into it. At the same time, a dull throbbing sensation started in her tailbone, slowly spreading to the rest of her lower back. This pain was not quite severe

enough to distract from the acute pain in her stomach that was oscillating between sharp stabs and a pressure as if someone was pinching her from the inside. She thought back to the glass of water she drank from the faucet in Nabila's kitchen, cursing herself for forgetting the fat MUM water bottle that lay unopened in her satchel, weighing it down to the point of causing red indentations on her shoulders.

She involuntarily lurched forward, no longer able to pay attention to the story that Nabila had gone into about how her father secured a deal with Forever 21 for his garments factory and how that meant she got all the trendiest styles for free before anyone else did. Ishika looked around, spinning her head from side to side, craning her neck to see if there was a bathroom anywhere in her line of vision that she could make it to before her insides carried out their rebellion and bursted out of her body. Zarah caught her eye in between her frantic head swivels and grabbed Ishika's hand, which she hadn't even realized was clutching her satchel so tightly that her knuckles were white.

"Um, I really need to pee," said Zarah, already turning over her heels and dragging Ishika behind her. "Probably shouldn't go by myself." Briefly, Nabila's story was interrupted, and she looked at the two of them with annoyance before turning back to them. Now, she was on her dad's relationship with executives at H&M and how she had been allowed to attend a top-secret photoshoot with Beyoncé.

If the men stared shamelessly at the girls who minded their own business and looked through racks of clothing at the mall, then they stared ruthlessly at the two girls who sprinted disruptively through corridors, hand-in-hand, in search of the nearest restroom. Two men, both with very tan skin and wearing matching plaid button down shirts, stood holding hands in the middle of the hallway, not moving out of the way when they were trying to rush through. They craned their necks to look at both Ishika and Zarah's backsides as they walked past. One of their eyebrows raised and their mouths opened into a yellow-toothed and amused smile.

They were moving so quickly past them that Ishika almost didn't hear the mocking sound of disgust that one of them made. "*Isss. Chi chi chi*," he said. "*Dyakh*." He let go of his companion's hand for a brief moment in order to point at her with his middle finger.

They ran through several corridors, all lined with shops that displayed gold bangles in locked cases or colorful saris folded to reveal the most embellished parts and turned sharply past several corners without spotting a familiar bathroom symbol. Ishika was beginning to lose hope when, finally, they found a small enclave lined with white tile and a sign that said WASHROOM above it, written in both English and Bengali. They sprinted towards it and turned to the left room, which had sign that said WOMANS written in English and *MUHILA* written in Bengali, almost slipping on the wet tile that had grey smudges and footprints all over it from the polluted Dhaka streets.

Three cramped stalls with grey doors, all left slightly ajar, lined the left side of the small room that also had white tile floors and walls. Everything besides the floors looked as though there was at least an attempt to keep it clean. Above the modern marble sink that had stones that the water was meant to flow elegantly over was a mirror that only had a few water spots. The walls were kept dusted and immaculately white. Only the tile floors had the grime accumulated from the overpopulated city that bustled just outside the pale pink walls of Pink City.

Ishika lunged forward and entered the first stall on her left. She slammed the door, holding the door closed with her left while she unbuttoned and pulled her pants down with the other. Even though the toilet was left unflushed which, under normal circumstances, would cause her to roam the stalls until she found one a more sanitary toilet, she immediately plopped down without even removing her satchel from her shoulder.

"Ugh!" Ishika let out a high-pitched exclamation. "There's no lock."

"I'll hold it, you go!"

Her legs closed and body keeled forward, she nursed the satchel between her thighs and stomach, hoping that the pressure would help calm her stomach, as holding a wound closed would stop it from bleeding more. She scrunched up her face and closed her eyes, as though that would somehow provide release for the pain in the pit of her stomach and lower back. She labored to steady her breathing before opening her eyes. Her pants were crumpled at her ankles and touching the dirt-caked and wet ground, so she quickly spread her feet apart so that her pants were held suspended above the floor. When her pants were held taut at her ankles, her eyes jumped immediately to a brown stain on her pink Limited Too underwear. She felt the heat creeping up her neck as she realized what had happened. She had involuntarily released. This had happened to her only once before, the last time she was in Bangladesh, when she had eaten street *fuchkas* despite her mother's protests.

"Shit," she muttered under her breath. Tears stung the corners of her eyes. Shit was right.

"Everything okay in there?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine," she said, curtly, trying to make sure her voice didn't quiver as the first teardrop threatened to fall from her right tear duct.

Frantically, with both hands, she dug through her satchel for the baby wipes that she was instructed to bring. She pulled out the off-brand Huggies pouch and yanked out a wipe so forcefully that three came with it. Holding both of the extra wipes and the package with her left hand, she first dabbed at her face and carefully soaked up the tears so as to not mess up her carefully applied eyeliner with her right hand. She, then, steadied her pants, and tried to wipe away the brown stain.

Her efforts were futile. All she had managed to do was further dampen the area. She cleaned herself off, flushing the stall with one of the extra wipes that she held in her hands. She shoved the door open, accidentally pushing Zarah.

"Oh, sorry."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing!"

She rushed over to the sink to scrub her hands of the dirtiness she had just endured. In the mirror, she noticed the slight pinkness around her eyes and nose that probably tipped off Zarah that she was crying.

After drying off her hands on her own shirt due to the lack of paper towels, Ishika took a deep breath and, pulling out another wipe, blew her nose. "We need to leave, *like*, now."

Zarah pressed her lips together tightly for a moment, studying Ishika's face and assessing whether or not she could figure out what was going on with her friend before she said something. "Okay, sure. I'll text Nabila to call the driver back."

"No, can you just call my mom to come get me? I don't want to interrupt your shopping trip."

"Don't be silly. I'll take your mom, like, an hour to get here. We can go, just the two of us, if no one else wants to go yet."

Hesitantly, Ishika agreed.

Gingerly, Zarah asked, "You ready to go back?"

Ishika nodded her head. She adjusted her pants before following Zarah towards the door.

A few texts back and forth with Nabila, who was the only one out of the six of them who had reliable cell service, revealed that they were now in a different store called *Poshak* now on the fourth floor.

When Ishika and Zarah arrived, Mariam announced to the whole group, "The driver is almost here. He can take y'all wherever! We think we're gonna stay a little while." And then, after a little pause, realized she should probably add a touch of courtesy. "We really hope you feel better, Ishika!"

Once again, heat pricked up Ishika's neck and up to her ears. "Thanks!" she exclaimed, a little bit higher pitched than she had intended it to come out. She turned around and, without waiting for Zarah, waddled towards the ground floor and exit out of this pale pink hell.

She had been waiting at the door, squinting her eyes in the sun and craning her neck looking for the Mercedes that had brought them here just under an hour ago, for only a minute when Zarah came out, looking for her.

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed.

"Madam," said a soft-spoken, child's voice with a thick Bengali accent. The voice came from near them, but surely was not addressing them. "Madam, are you from Umreeka?"

She realized that her line of vision had been too high to spot where the voice was coming from. She looked down and, at about waist-level, there were two little girls. Both girls had ratty clothes caked with dirt that were two shades darker than they were intended to be and black hair so tangled that it was difficult to tell its length. Each of the little girls had respectively fixed Ishika and Zarah with a stare that sent a chill up Ishika's spine. She turned her head back towards the street so as to not make eye contact with the little girl any longer, as she normally did when she encountered other little girls like her.

"Madam, do you have any takas for us? Please, madam, our mother is sick. We have to eat," said the smaller one of the two whose clothes were even dirtier and whose face and hands were caked with dirt. They looked to be very close in age.

"Sister, please help us," pleaded the second little girl who was a few inches taller than her sister, if they were really sisters.

Zarah took charge of the situation, saying harshly as Ishika had seen her parents say, "We don't have any money." She shooed them away with one hand, her other hand moving to her black crossbody purse.

"I know you are from Umreeka," said the taller one. They inched closer and closer.

"Yeah, we know you have money." The longer time went on, the harsher and more broken their Bengali became. Now, one of them began circling them so that the taller girl was in front of them and the smaller was almost behind them.

"Y'Allah!" the girl who was directly behind them exclaimed, just as Ishika caught sight of the Mercedes that would take her away from here to a place of comfort. Ishika looked over her shoulder momentarily at the girl, her hand shooting to her satchel. The girl pointed and let out a strong, loud laugh, revealing a set of brown and yellow teeth, two of which were missing. "There's something on your ass."

Ishika turned to face Zarah, her eyes stinging with tears once again. This time, they came rolling down her face before she could grab a wipe out from her satchel and stop them. Zarah grabbed her hand and pulled her but the taller girl sidestepped again and again so as to block their paths.

"*Taka dyan, taka dyan!*" she said. "Give me money, give me money!"

"*Shor, meye!"* Zarah exclaimed. "Move, girl!" She pulled Ishika across the standstill traffic in the street, weaving in and out of vibrantly decorated rickshaws, forest green CNG baby taxis, and cars that radiated heat and let out smoke that coated their bodies and clothing. By the time they reached the car, the driver had already come out and opened the door for them. They jumped in, slammed the door shut behind them, and manually adjusted to lock, almost as though afraid the little girls were going to try to hop in the car behind them. Through thick tears that now obscured Ishika's vision and embarrassed sobs that muffled her hearing, she almost didn't hear Zarah give the driver her grandparents' address.

The car stopped right outside of the now closed garage door of Ishika's grandparents' red brick flat. The *darwan*, not recognizing this mysterious Mercedes-Benz, straightened up and became more alert upon its arrival. Once he saw Ishika step out of the car, he turned around and

punched in a code to open the garage and let them in. His eyes lingered for a moment on Ishika's puffy eyes, but he dropped his gaze when their eyes met.

Once again, Zarah, who had only visited Ishika at her grandparents' place once, took charge and bounded up the stairs that led to her grandparents' apartment. They both used their fists to bang repeatedly on the dusty grey door. The peephole on this door, and most other doors in Bangladesh, was significantly lower than the peepholes back home in Chandler.

Ishika hoped it wasn't time for her grandmother's favorite Pakistani soap operas. If it was, it was likely that the TV would be blaring in order for her grandmother's hearing aids to pick up the dialogue. Finally, after her hand began to feel bruised from the banging, one of the maidservants, Shapna, opened the door. She was wearing a loose light blue cotton salwar kameez. Her hand was protectively encircled around the little bulb at the end of her *orna*, which was draped loosely over her chest, the end of it tied around whatever takas she possessed at the time. Her hair, which smelled strongly of coconut oil, was pulled back in a bun.

"*Apa*," she said, respectfully, the term to denote elder sister, even though Shapna was several years older than Ishika. "Sorry it took me so long. I couldn't hear from the cooking room. Come, come inside."

"Thank you," she managed to spit out before Zarah grabbed her waist and, from behind, pushed her towards the bedroom that her family was quartered in. Irfan was laying down in the bed when they came inside and jerked upright when he noticed that someone outside of the family had bursted into their room.

"Hey! What the hell?" They ignored his exclamations and bolted straight for the bathroom.

Ishika once again pulled down her pants and sat down on the toilet seat. This time, she was in less of a hurry, comfortable to the point that she forgot to hide the brown spot on her underwear from Zarah.

"Ishik—" Zarah began to say.

Ishika quickly shifted her pants so as to hide the spot.

"Do you think you could go grab some underwear for me? It's in the purple suitcase."

Without a word, Zarah left the bathroom, softly shutting the door behind her. A few minutes later, when Ishika began to think that it was taking Zarah a little longer than it should have. When she came back, she had one of Zarah's ugliest pairs of granny panties in one hand and a small square wrapped in purple flowery plastic in the other. Unexpectedly, she burst into laughter.

"Please get out," Ishika pleaded, the tears flowing steadily now. "Can you call my mom to come back, like, *now*?"

"Ishika, you didn't *shit* yourself," Zarah said, breathlessly, in between laughs. "You just got your period."

Ishika, still sitting down on the toilet with her pants around her ankles when her mouth hell open in disbelief. Her mind flashed back to the lessons they had in school about puberty. The boys in had been taken into one the gym where they mostly played pickup games of basketball after a cursory talk about their bodies changing; the girls, on the other hand, were all taken into the cafeteria and shown a clinical informational video about periods and the dangers they would all be susceptible to once they got theirs. Since then, several of her friends had gotten theirs, coming to school excitedly the next day to tell their female friends and viewing their male friends in a different light for the first time. She honestly was even starting to get a little insecure about the fact that hers hadn't started yet. For a moment, the cramps in her stomach transformed to an ache from laughter, but she didn't mind it.

They stepped out of the bathroom to find Irfan in the same position as before. He removed one headphone and, for a moment, looked at them as though he were about to say something. Instead, he muttered, "Girls are so fucking weird," placing his headphone back in his ear. When they came out of the bedroom, Shapna was waiting for them with two bowls of mango, milk, and rice waiting for them and a stained-toothed grin plastered on her tanned face.

"*Apa*," she said. "You're a woman now."

Bhapa Pitha

At the New Hampshire State Prison for Men, Tazrin followed a uniformed security guard that she had never seen before—with brown skin and a name tag that said A. Gomes—into a narrow stone-grey brick room. The wall was punctuated every 10 feet or so by a little rectangular window trimmed in black metal frame. Each window was partitioned from the next by a black metal divider on both sides of the wall, a half-hearted attempt at giving the inmates and their visitors privacy. To the right of each window, an old-looking tan-colored telephone was hung up on the wall. Mr. A. Gomes, who accentuated his Ts and Ps to hide an accent she couldn't quite put her finger on, instructed Tazrin to take a seat at the third stall from the left on a little metal stool. He had the same Portuguese surname of some of the Catholic Indians she knew growing up going to Christian private schools in Bangladesh, but not the same Indian accent. She wondered how he ended up in such a grey, gloomy place, and she supposed he wondered the same about her.

The seat he told her to sit in was so cold that it sent a shiver up her spine. She could feel the metal through her favorite pair of dark wash fleece-lined jeans that she reserved for the brutal New Hampshire winters. She realized there was nowhere to place her oversized purse. She used to keep emergency granola bars, a water bottle, and a change of clothes for her son in there. And, occasionally, a pack of cigarettes and a bag of *chanachur* for her husband. Faced with no other option, Tazrin held the mostly-empty red purse uncomfortably in her lap and waited.

Several long minutes later, her son Ali walked through one of the doors on the other side of the wall, escorted by an austere-looking guard who was wearing the same uniform as broad-shouldered Mr. A. Gomes. Ali's hands were held behind his back by what she could only assume were cold metal handcuffs wrapped around his wrists. When he was young, she would have to grab onto his arms to ensure that he wouldn't get lost in a crowded shopping mall or grocery store because he refused to ride in the stroller. Back then, when she guided his little waddling

form through the store, her fingers could encircle his wrist as easily as the handle of her shopping cart.

This was the seventeenth time in two years that she had been able to make the trip down to visit him. Every time she came, she could see a newfound gauntness in his face. As he took a seat in the chair in front of her, she could see in more detail that his cheeks were more sunken and the dark circles underneath his eyes were more pronounced. He had been keeping a well-maintained beard before, but now the hair around his jawline and mouth were scragglier and more unkempt and the spots on the tops of his cheeks were sprouting the hair that he would normally carefully shave. Through the scratched and smudged plastic window, she could see that his once-broad shoulders and arm, that he'd worked out to keep toned, had lost definition and had slimmed down considerably. His jawline, which had always been sharp like his father's, was now even more prominent. His eyes, light brown, large, and almond shaped like hers, were cast downward, as if in shame. His nose, the only other feature that he had inherited from his father, appeared even sharper and larger now on his thinning face.

Tazrin outstretched her arm and curled her fingers slowly and hesitantly around the sickly tan-colored phone, which was approximately three shades lighter than her own sun-tanned skin. As she brought the phone to her face, Ali's sad eyes flickered to her own. He outstretched his newly atrophied arm (at least 10 shades darker than the milky tone he was born with), pressed the phone to his ear, his elbows resting on the concrete counter and his shoulders tensed, and then he finally looked up to meet her eyes.

"Ammu," he said. "How is everything?" His jaw was clenched, she could tell, in an effort to conceal whatever emotions were brewing in his brain.

The way he said her name, Ammu, "mother," was so different now than when he first learned to speak (earlier than most of the other children in their community). When he'd said his first word ("dudu," an endearing Bengali nickname for "milk"), all of the other doting mothers at the *dawat* had predicted that he would be very intelligent. While she enjoyed the

prospect that her child might one day be smarter than the rest of his peers and therefore (hopefully) more successful, she remembered at the time being annoyed that he had said "Bubu," a twist on "Abbu" or the word for father, months earlier than he had said "Mumu." If he was truly going to be that smart, why didn't he recognize and address the person who spent all of her time taking care of him before the person who had only even held him a few times?

Most of those friends from the *dawat*s had peeled away from her life over the past few years. The text messages, phone calls, and social media "likes" and comments of affirmation became sparser and sparser as news of her son's impending trial spread further and further through the tight-knit Bangladeshi community of New Hampshire. When she'd first moved here after her wedding, in the winter of 1980, the women of this community had gone out of their way to make themselves available to her in her times of need. Her husband, Shumon, who was not yet in a wheelchair at that time, had driven to pick her up at the airport with a winter coat that Shikha Bhabi had insisted he take for her, knowing that she would be shocked by the bitter cold after coming in from Bangladesh, where it is humid and hot almost all of the time. These women had talked her through how to be married to a man who was 16 years older than her and quelled her anxieties about living away from home for the first time in her life. These women remembered the war better than she did, and they explained to her the sacrifices her husband had had to make to ensure that women like them would be safe in Bangladesh (at the time East Bengal). She'd spent almost every weekend of her adult life gossiping with these women about Bollywood celebrities and talking about the latest sari trends. She'd been pregnant together with these women; nursed sick babies back to health with them. These women had acted as her relatives in a land in which she didn't have any. And finally, these women turned their backs on both her and her husband, who they had once revered.

"Everything's okay," she replied, though her voice cracked from underutilization. "How are you?"

"Where's Abbu?" he asked, finally, now that he was avoiding having to answer a question, taking the time to take in the fact that his father had not made it to see him.

This morning, she had woken up two hours earlier than usual to make Shumon's favorite breakfast: *bhapa pitha* with *cha*. Jaggery rice cakes with tea. She had to pull out the special silver *kolshi* she had brought back from Bangladesh. The first hour was spent melting the *gur*, the concentrated cane juice product called jaggery, to get the perfect consistency while the white rice she would use for the shell was ground and boiling, making a soft bubbling sound in the background. When she had put *gur* in the center of its rice shell, she placed the silver *kolshi* pitcher on the stove, the *pitha* on top, and placed a muslin cloth over it, to ensure that it had the perfect consistency. Simultaneously, she heated up the kettle on the stove and brought out the Lipton tea bags she'd bought weekly at the grocery store—the ones that almost tasted the same as the *cha* she used to have back home, but that didn't quite travel down her throat in the same way. In a half-hearted effort to lose weight, she had stopped putting evaporated milk in her and Shumon's tea. This morning, she reached into the pantry for a can of evaporated milk that would bring the consistency of just Shumon's tea closer to the *cha* she bought from street vendors back in Bangladesh, hoping it might revive her husband enough to see their son one last time.

Throughout the years of their marriage, her husband's condition had been slowly deteriorating. A bullet wound to his left thigh from the Liberation War of 1971 had caused him, at the time of their marriage, to have a slight limp. Now it bound him to a wheelchair. His joints and bones—once strong enough to allow him to walk the long distance from his village in Jessore to Dhaka—now had aches and pains that made it hard for him to feed himself and use the bathroom. A few years earlier, his condition made him unable to continue his job as an IT Specialist at Samsung, where he had worked for over 20 years. At that time, she had to assume the role of the sole breadwinner and caretaker of the home.

More limiting than any of the physical illnesses he faced, however, were the shards of the war that had lodged themselves in this memory. As he got older, it became increasingly difficult

to shut out flashes of young Bengali men being lined up and shot or the writhing bodies of screaming women being dragged out of their homes by the Pakistanis. These memories had escaped from his nightmares to torment him almost constantly. He could no longer find the energy even to protest Tazrin's suggestions that he seek counseling.

Tazrin often spoke out loud while she cleaned their bedroom or listened to music before bed, catching him up on the happenings of the day or week, or even talking through her thoughts mostly for her own benefit. He used to help her talk through things or at least mumble or grunt to acknowledge her, but since she started to explain the situation with Ali's charges and sentencing, he became more and more quiet and unresponsive. More often than not, Shumon lay awake throughout the night, his eyes glazed over and fixated on one spot on the ceiling. Not wanting him to be inconvenienced, Tazrin had started leaving food on the bedside table each morning along with a fresh glass of water. Now, the only time he would bother speaking to her was when he needed to use the bathroom.

"*Washroom-e jabo*," he would say, without moving his eyes from the spot on the ceiling. Whenever this happened, she would sit on the edge of his side of the bed which, fortunately, was closer to the restroom, sling his arm over her shoulder, and guide him over slowly, supporting almost the all his weight. A few years ago, this would have been impossible, but he had lost nearly fifty pounds since he began losing his appetite.

"No, your Abbu couldn't come," she said, a little more bluntly than she had intended. "His bad leg is acting up more nowadays," she added, a line she had rehearsed on the hour-long drive from Nashua (where she'd lived her entire adult life) to Concord, where Ali was serving his sentence.

She looked upon the face of her only son who—despite the doctor's warnings that he would be abnormally small—had grown to an astounding six-foot-one. On the frame of his bedroom door, lines drawn with multi-colored Sharpies marked his growth over the years, the largest range of which occurred during his freshman year of high school, when he shot up almost

a full six inches. That was also when his school's principal first began calling Tazrin in for meetings in his office.

She had heard stories from other mothers about their children acting out at school when they were young and then growing out of it. She wasn't prepared to learn about how totally oblivious she had been to what was going on in Ali's world.

Earlier that school year (in 2001, just a month after the fateful date of September 11), when looking over some of his calculus homework, she noticed that he'd begun spelling his name "Olly." It weighed on her heart that he was actively working to hide his heritage, even though he hadn't been particularly connected to the culture growing up in their primarily upper-middle-class white neighborhood. She had never really been able to make him speak Bengali at home, let alone sing or dance at annual cultural events like Bengali New Year's, or *Pohela Boishakh*. Though it tightened her chest that her only son probably wouldn't carry on the traditions she cherished from back home to his own family that he may have in the future, she decided not to bring it up to him. They were all dealing in their own ways with a shifting political climate that was increasingly toxic towards Muslim people.

At home, they began regularly getting phone calls to their landline until, eventually, she elected to take their number out of the yellow pages. Broken glass bottles of beer and other types of alcohol regularly littered their driveway and left dents in their garage door. Once, a rock made it through their window and into their study room. At work, she herself had started going by "Taz" instead of "Tazrin" in an effort to blend in with her mostly white co-workers at the engineering firm. Before 9-11, political and religious differences hadn't seemed to cause any issues with the conservatives who surrounded her, but now members of the team she oversaw were less responsive to her constructive criticism and no longer appreciated her praise. Her peers, with whom she had once regularly attended happy hours after work, began quietly and cuttingly spreading the idea that she, an immigrant, was "taking the spot" of other, more talented engineers that had not been hired recently, even though they were "more qualified."

Ali had been on the basketball team since middle school, something that she and Shumon used to joke about. Since Ali grew to be much taller than anyone had expected, they'd decided to begin paying for private lessons and allow him to join the school's team, hoping it might one day lead to a scholarship to a decent university. On the day Principal Gupta had first called Tazrin into his office, the team had been given a break between practicing layups, during which they'd invented a game of their own: "Pin the Bomb on the Terrorist." In response, Ali had run off from practice and locked himself in the boys' restroom in the math hallway, several corridors over from the gym, where he cried for over an hour.

After she had been able to coax him out of the bathroom, Dr. Gupta asked them into her office. They were met with soft eyes and a sympathetic look.

"Don't mind them, Ali, they're just young boys," she said with a faint Indian accent. "Something terrible has happened, and no one knows what to make of it. If they're truly your friends, they will soon understand that they shouldn't behave this way. You'll be stronger because of it."

Ali, with a nose pink from crying and cheeks mildly spattered with acne, muttered "Thanks, Dr. Gupta," and they were on their way home. She made him *ilish maach*, a signature Bangladeshi fish that was quite difficult to find in the markets of New Hampshire, fried in mustard paste that made her sneeze while cooking it and left her fingernails yellow and even picked out the bones to make it easier for him to eat. For dessert, she prepared *bhapa pitha*, which—though he pretended not to like Bangladeshi food—was his favorite meal. If it were up to him, he would have only the *bhapa pitha*; at the time, it wasn't.

"I asked for *bhapa pitha* for my last meal," he said.

Finally, at age 19, he was no longer embarrassed or ashamed to be Bangladeshi, in a way that was more public than before. If only he could have come to this point earlier in his life, she wouldn't have had to chase him around the house to feed him *daal-bhath* when he was younger.

Often, she gave up and scarfed down the *daal-bhath* herself, always eating more than she needed to so that she would not have to waste any of the food that many of the street beggars in Bangladesh would give their lives to have. Then she would heat up some dinosaur chicken nuggets in the microwave—even though she saw every time she threw away the cardboard packaging that they had almost no nutritional value—to make sure that he was at least getting some protein.

"They don't know how to make it though, so I might just have to eat a Wawa burger."

His good-natured sense of humor that, even in the toughest of times, he brought out to make her feel better, was showing. Over the years, he began to realize that the comfortable status their family was able to maintain was fully due to her efforts. His basketball fees, piano lessons, college tuition (which unfortunately were not subsidized with an athletic scholarship), would not have been possible had she not entered the workforce again in their family's time of need. As much as he also revered his father, the war hero, he understood that his well-being was directly tied to Tazrin's tenacity and work ethic.

When he came home from his first Thanksgiving break at Vermont Technical College, which was a short two-hour drive away, he came home and talked about all the "brown" friends he had made. Much to her surprise, he had elected not to join a fraternity, not trying as hard as he had his whole life for his slightly tanned skin to blend into the sea of much paler peers. He had decided to study engineering, just like her. "I'll be too busy studying to pledge," he'd explained. Regardless, he seemed to have sought out the only other South Asians who attended the small school.

At the time, with lessened responsibilities at home now that he was no longer living there, Tazrin had decided, for the first time in her life, to indulge her hobbies of writing poetry and creating pottery on the side of her normal engineering career. She didn't really need to worry about him anymore; he was a big boy now, and she became too busy to even really have time to worry about him. She barely noticed when he began to dig deeper into his faith and

found a new interest in Islam when there was a time that it was difficult to drag him to the local mosque even for Eid prayer. Perhaps, she could have been there to answer his questions about Islam instead of him turning to whatever misconceived sources he began referring to.

But there was no use, now, thinking about what could have been. The fact of the matter was this: he did it. He had used his engineering knowledge to construct the bomb. He and his friends had snuck into a church near their school's campus, which was largely run by and for students, and which was notorious for spreading Islamophobic rhetoric through weekly Sunday sermons. Their intention was to destroy the confessional that stood near the entrance of the church, highlighting the irony in their intolerance. In the explosion, they had inadvertently caused a portion of the ceiling to cave in, which in turn knocked over some heavy boxes that were stored in the basement of the church, where three boys were sitting and planning out their sermon for the next Sunday. Two of them died on impact at the scene and the third passed away due to significant head injuries the next morning in the hospital. Within hours, police had found Ali and his three friends and had them in custody.

In the trial, Rabeed—the only Muslim civil rights lawyer they could find who was even slightly willing to risk their firm's reputation in the day's climate—tried to prove that it had been an accident. Ending lives was not the intention. The intention was to send a message about the danger of Islamophobia, a political feat that had proven too large for four college-aged boys to take on. A feat that had revealed the stupidity of young boys who had spent their adolescent lives being asked how their "Uncle Osama" was doing and being called towel heads. At the end of the day, everyone served time in prison and, Ali—since he was the only engineering major among the boys and since they had found bomb-making plans in his dorm room—faced a different fate.

"*Keno, Abbu?*" she asked him, not truly wanting to know the answer. "Why would you do this, my son?"

"I didn't think it would go that far. They promised me that it wasn't going to really hurt anyone," said Ali. "But—." He hesitated, stopping in his tracks. Was he unsure of how she would

react? Was he trying to protect her feelings? His nose began to turn pink, as it always did when he was about to cry. He swallowed, as though a lump rose in his throat. She saw his eyes beginning to moisten with tears threatening to fall, but she knew he would do everything in his power to not let them.

"It wasn't fair how they treated us." He was referring to a different "they" now. A "they" that had treated him like an outcast to the point where he did not fit properly into either of the cultures in which she had tried to raise him. A "they" that degraded him to the point that he sought out another. A "they" that led him to commit an atrocity that she would not have ever thought her Ali would be capable of committing. "I'm sorry that it all came back to you."

A. Gomes came back into the room promptly and seriously at the end of what would be their last hour together. Once again, he led her through the correctional facility, but this time back out into the real world.

"Can you take me to the cook?" she said. His rhythmic pace broke for a moment before it picked right back up again. "I mean, the person who makes the last meals?" He stopped in his tracks and looked at her for a moment, without saying a word. "Please."

They came to the last hallway before the exit, which was to the right. To her surprise, he took a left. "This way," he said, not revealing any emotion in his voice.

They walked through another dark grey corridor before taking a right and turning into another hallway. This one had a bulletin of recipes and a white board with a work schedule scribbled hastily on it in different colored Expo markers. The colors didn't appear to be arranged or written in any particular pattern. Mr. A. Gomes led her straight to the opposite end of the kitchen that had a thin film of aerosolized grease settled on every surface and grimy stove top. She looked up to see speckled grey and white ceiling tiles blooming with brown stains and looked down to see a porous black rubber mat littered with pieces of chopped vegetables.

Mr. A. Gomes was walking towards a man who had scraggly light brown hair that was tied back into a thin ponytail and held together with one of those office supply rubber bands and

covered with a hair net. He turned around and she could see that he had a deep scar over his left eye, which was a light grey color with no defined pupil. The other eye, which was a soft brown color, focused on her face, switching from eye to eye, working out why this strange woman had entered his domain.

"This is Lefty," said Mr. A. Gomes. "He's the head chef and a former inmate. He leads the other chefs for most of the day-to-day stuff, but he's in charge of the death row meals."

Lefty gave a nod and lifted both corners of his mouth in a smile that felt warmer than she expected. She saw his name tag that said "Lefty" in the same font as A. Gomes' name tag.

"My son's favorite dish is traditionally Bengali." Her words were coming out quickly out of nervousness. "He was told you guys can't make it. Would it be possible for me to write out a recipe for you?"

Lefty gave another nod.

She reached into her purse and rummaged for her notebook that she keeps to write thoughts that pop into her head and to take notes in meetings. After flipping through pages past notes from meetings and emotional ramblings, she ripped out an empty page. Not finding a clean surface to write on, she used her hand to wipe off some stray pieces of lettuce from the counter, put down her notebook, and began writing:

JAGGERY RICE CAKE

Ingredients:

- *Rice flour, 2 cups*
- *Fresh coconut, 1½ cups*
- *For steaming, ½ cup water*
- *Salt, 1 teaspoon*
- *Jaggery, broken into small pieces, 1 cup*

Tears were falling steadily from her eyes, at this point, falling onto the page and threatening to make her words illegible. She kept scribbling onto the page, her hasty half-cursive half-print becoming messier by the word.

Preparation:

- *Stir rice flour while adding ½ cup coconut and salt*
- *Sprinkle small amounts of water on rice flour mixture to dampen it, then set it aside for about half an hour*
- *Take water in a separate bowl and soak a piece of muslin fabric, then set it aside for the time being*
- *Place damp flour through a strainer, use the help of your palm to sieve the wet flour through the strainer*
- *Boil some water in the silver pitcher by covering with its lid, and proceed to cake making steps as vapor appears through holes*

Frantically, she used her sleeve to wipe her tears away from her eyes, bringing some of her mascara and eyeliner as well. A black smudge of kohl was left on her white sweater, and she recalled pulling her sleeve over her hand to use it to gently wipe away tears from Ali's little cheeks when he was a little boy.

Pitha-Making Steps:

- *Spread rice flour mixture in a small bowl lightly in a way that only half the bowl is covered*
- *Place coconut and jaggery mixture at center of bowl*
- *Cover coconut and jaggery by spreading more damp flour over it*
- *Take a muslin cloth from the water, wring it out, and spread it onto the bowl of flour*
- *Gather corners of the cloth with the bowl inside and carefully flip the bowl with the help of the cloth on the holes of the kolshi*

- *Carefully take out the bowl, gather the corners of the cloth on top of the flour mixture (it will hold the bowl-shaped cake)*
- *Steam cook for 6-8 minutes*

She handed ripped the recipe from her notebook and handed it to Lefty. Without a word, started running out of the kitchen and towards her car. She stopped suddenly, realizing that she had to go back and let Lefty know that he couldn't make the *bhapa pitha* without the *kolshi* from Bangladesh. She turned and was startled to find that A. Gomes was still following close behind her.

In Bengali, he addressed her, making her mouth fall slightly open with surprise. His Portuguese surname had been enough to mask the Sylheti accent she once knew so well having lived in that part of Bangladesh when her father's job had taken them there as a little girl.

"Apa," he said. *Sister*, he had called her. "My name is Amit. I haven't met a Bangladeshi person since I moved here after my parents passed back home, and I had no one else left for me there. I thought I might have a better life here." He paused and casted his eyes downward. "Well, I hope this life is temporary. I went from feeling jailed back in Bangladesh to being the jailer, and I don't particularly enjoy either." He lifted his chin up slightly. Their eyes met. "I have a *kolshi* at my home that was my mother's. I will bring it to Lefty to make the *pithas* for your son."

She let out a choked sob and fell to her knees. Amit let her cry for a few moments before extending his hand and gently lifting her off the ground. Her knees were weak, but she let him guide her through the grey concrete halls that were appeared blurry through her tears. He led her back to the front door and all the way to her car. Her hands were shaking, so he helped her press the right button to unlock the door. Then, when she fumbled to open it, he hooked his brown-skinned hand under the handle and held it open for her to get in. Swiftly, Amit turned around and headed back to the grey place where he acted as the jailer for the first time in his life.

She lost track of the amount of time that she sat in her car clutching her keys, waiting for the tears to subside enough to allow her to see the road. When her final tears rolled down her

face, she once again used the back of her sleeve to wipe her face dry. She noticed, when she put her keys in the ignition, that she had made red indentations from holding them so tightly. On her drive back to Nashua, to the home that she had lived in for most of her life but that didn't quite feel like home anymore, she thought about the date that was set for a fortnight from now. The date when she would come in to see him one last time. The date when would be allowed to embrace him one last time. She didn't know what she would say, but she had two weeks to jot down jagged disjointed thoughts in her notebook next to the jagged ripped paper from the recipe she tore out today. All she knew was that his belly would be full of *bhapa pitha*. That had to be enough for her.

Mehraz Rahman is a Bangladeshi American woman in her fourth year at the University of Texas at Austin. She is pursuing her Bachelor's in both Arts and Business Administration as a double Plan II Honors and Marketing major. A native Austinite, she was born to two Bangladeshi immigrant parents and with burnt orange blood flowing through her veins. Mehraz's passions lie in advocacy, having first become engaged in service work in middle school when she started volunteering with refugee youths at the Interfaith Action of Central Texas as an assistant English as a Second Language teacher every summer. Over her college years, she was involved as a member of Texas Orange Jackets, Texas Sweethearts, the Friar Society, and served as the university's Student Body Vice President. All of those involvements helped her to refine her interests and became involved in many advocacy efforts, including promoting mental health awareness, women's empowerment, and civic engagement. After completing this thesis, Mehraz can be found getting her life back in order and taking half of a victory lap in her final semester at the University of Texas next year. In the future, she plans to pursue a career in immigration law.